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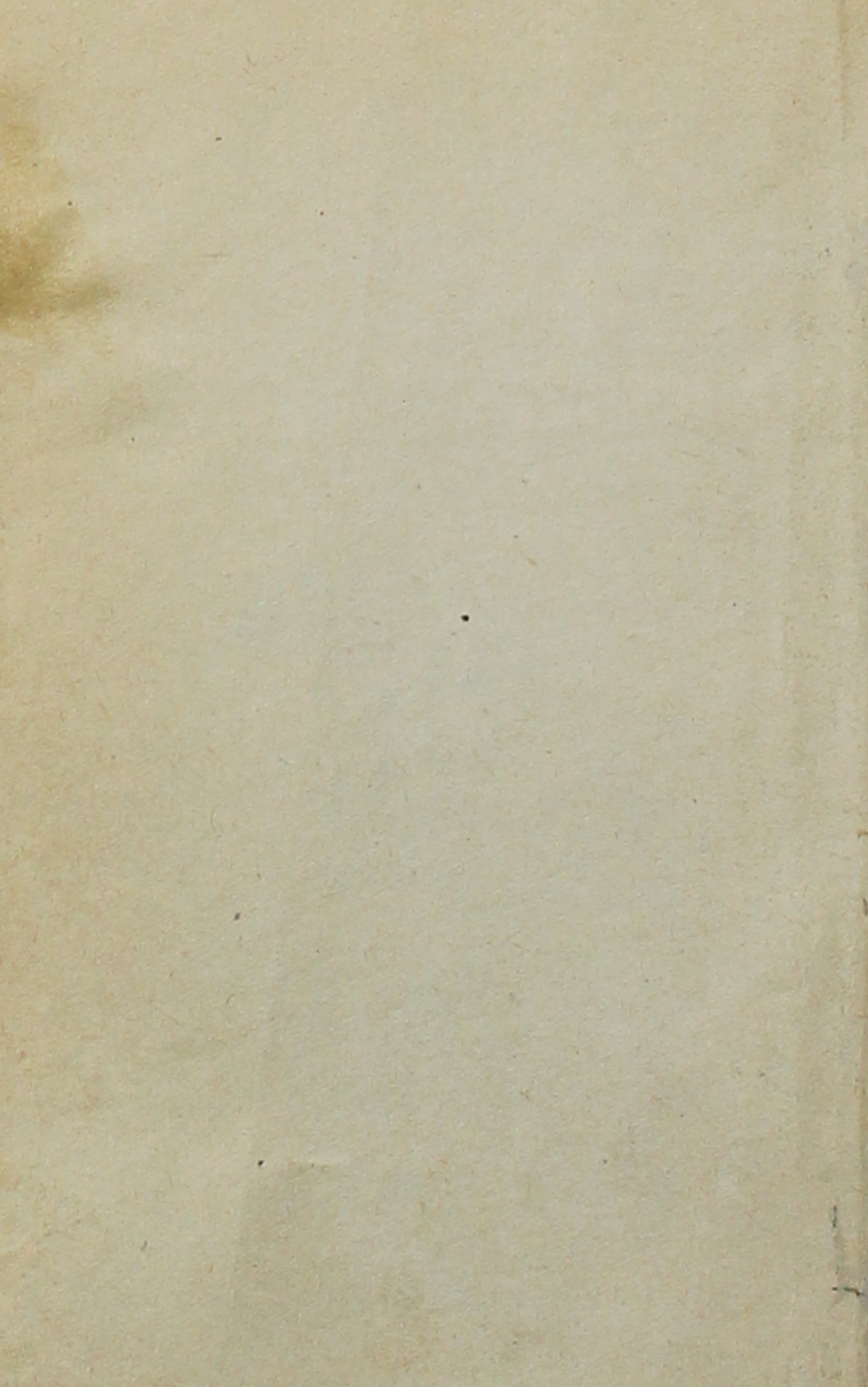


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THAT WASHINGTON AFFAIR

BY
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CHAPTER I

THE PROPOSITION

The still, suave Barrone spoke with just a touch of Latin American accent.

"Suppose," he said, "I could put you in touch with what you suggested then?"

Vail's pulses leaped.

Two weeks ago he had confided to Barrone: "What I want is something big to play for! High stakes! I'm sick of this so-called life. Sick of seeing the worst sides of the best people and the best bluffs of the worst! Washington society—blah, bunk and brass! Pseudo-aristocrats! High-ball smartness and cocktail wit! Here I am in the capital of the world, with other men pulling off big stuff right under my nose, and the best I do is fighting tea and boredom. I want a look-in on a real game. Something with a kick in it!"

Barrone had not replied to that at the time. He had waited to complete his investigation of this young American who, under certain circumstances, could be of great use to him. Now, as a result of that painstaking inquiry, his mind was made up; he would accommodate Mr. Vail.

They were sitting before the open fire in the big, handsomely furnished lounging room on the second

floor of the house Barrone rented on Q Street near du Pont Circle. They had the house to themselves. Although it was early in the evening, Barrone had dismissed his secretary and the servants.

"And suppose," he added, "it held the possibility of danger?"

Eagerness sounded through Vail's short laugh.

"That, I should think," he said, "would make it all the better."

Alberto Barrone flicked the ash from his cigarette into the fire and did not hurry his reply. He was a man of slender build and medium height, with black hair and a complexion so dark that it narrowly escaped swarthinness. Well on in middle age as he was, his grace of movement indicated strong muscles and good condition. A certain slowness of gesture in him was not sluggishness; it suggested unusual power.

"Yes," he acquiesced finally; "if you like that sort of thing."

Vail sprang from his chair and straightened to his full six feet of height.

"You mean you'll let me in on something?" he asked and, a characteristic gesture, ran the fingers of his right hand through his close-cut brown hair.

In spite of his thirty-three years, his unlined face gave him an extremely youthful appearance, which was heightened by a candid and easily provoked smile. He had the quick, sharp decisiveness of movement that goes with a high-strung temperament.

Barrone laughed appreciatively.

"Sit down," he said. "There are things to discuss."

He chose a deep, leather-covered chair opposite his companion and lifted an alcohol lighter from the table back of them to light a fresh cigarette. His black eyes gave the impression of a strange opaqueness, as if they had no depth, even now when with so much at stake he studied Vail across the flame of the lighter.

"Of course, Vail," he began with his habitual deliberativeness, "you've an idea what the game is. My very real friendship for you, as you know, dates back to two months ago. During the past few weeks I've taken care to hint now and then just enough to give you the inkling you might care to take advantage of, but at the same time so little that, if you felt repelled, I should have no regrets. You were aware of that?"

"Yes, I was," Vail replied, and sat leaning forward, his mobile lips parted.

"And you let me see that you wanted to come in," Barrone resumed. "From the outset I was sure of your ability to help, but I had to be doubly sure. A mistake in a thing of this sort must never occur. So I did the necessary thing. I put on foot certain investigations. You perceive that I had no other course?"

"Obviously," Vail made the word emphatic.

Barrone moved the upper part of his body forward a little, an effect of gracefully acknowledging the other's pleasing sanity.

"And I shall speak frankly of the results," he said. "What Washington knew about Mr. Carston J. Vail as a result of his two years residence here included three things." He checked them off with the thumb of his cigarette hand on the finger tips of the left. "He was amply supplied with money; he was the most sought after dinner guest in town; and his friendship with the Honorable Francis I. Barfield, Assistant Secretary of State, was so close as to give him tremendous influence at the State Department if he cared to exert it. What I have been able to find out includes three things also." He again checked them off on his finger tips. "You have even more influence with Barfield than people think; you are the most sought after dinner guest in town; and, instead of being amply supplied with money, you are the exact opposite; that is to say, hard up."

He paused, a smile of inquiry lifting the corners of his lips.

Vail reached to the table for a cigarette and laughed, a faint embarrassment in his face.

"Oh, I won't deny it, Barrone," he admitted. "But why bring it up?"

Barrone leaned back his head and slowly blew a thread of smoke toward the ceiling, watching the last of it break into thin gray ripples.

"Because," he explained, "if you come in on this, there will be a lot of money in it for you; I think I

may say more money than you have ever hoped to own."

The sound of Vail's quickly exhaled breath was clearly audible, satisfactory evidence of his eagerness. There was a sudden change in the Latin-American's bearing. His thin lips were compressed, his under-shot lower jaw looked hard as iron. Glancing at him, Vail thought of motion pictures he had seen of active lava fields, with the pressure of the lava making bubbles here and there on the earth's crust. For the moment the man's long-practiced outward calm scarcely concealed his tenseness, a forcefulness that emanated from him and touched the younger man.

But his voice was unchanged when he spoke.

"The point is," he stipulated: "are you willing to use that State Department influence, to the limit?"

"I am!" Vail told him.

"And you can absolutely make good on the promise, even if it is a matter of a big thing?"

Vail hesitated. Barrone dropped his glance to the fireplace. For a few seconds the only sound in the room was the whimpering of the flames.

"Yes," Vail answered at last. There was strain in his voice. "With the mo—" He stopped, and began again: "With a good case to back us, I can deliver."

Barrone slowly raised his eyes to meet Vail's.

"Our case is perfect," he said smoothly. "Now here's the proposition: Saragonda, the least developed

of the Central American republics, is the richest in natural resources. It is also the most infernally governed of them all. Ramon Lestrada, the present president, is the head of a debauched and robber government. General Sotero Santos, a famous fighter and patriot, stands ready to overthrow the Lestrada régime. As a patriotic Saragondan, I am for General Santos. So I ask you: if we can assure your State Department that General Santos has the arms, the men and the financial backing to beat Lestrada, can you secure the promise of this Government to recognize Santos as the real ruler the moment he wins his first battle?"

Vail made the bargain without hesitation.

"I can," he declared. "Barfield is the Administration's authority on Latin-American affairs. His recommendation will get the President's signature. Of course, you've got to be able to show that Lestrada's Government is crooked as well as beaten."

Barrone negligently waved his hand.

"That's easy. You've seen the newspaper dispatches out of Saragonda from time to time during the past six months?"

"Yes; I have." ✕

"Well," Barrone assured him, "conditions down there are even worse than the papers say. Furthermore, the New York money interested in the Santos revolution comes from men friendly to Barfield's political party."

Vail's surprise was evident.

"It's as far on as that! What do the New Yorkers get out of it?"

The reply enlightened him and at the same time demonstrated how unreservedly Barrone trusted him.

"In the interior of Saragonda there is an area of, roughly speaking, fifteen thousand square miles ideally suited to the growing of the hevea rubber tree. That is the only place on the globe, outside of territory controlled by the British rubber monopoly, in which the hevea tree will produce and to which Americans can gain access. The castilloa rubber tree can be grown in many places in Mexico and Central America, but it isn't commercially profitable. The hevea is the only one to break the foreign monopoly. The United States Government has spent much in the Philippines seeking just such land as Saragonda, and Saragonda only, has to offer. Our proposition would enable New Yorkers to make the United States independent of the rubber monopoly now exercised by England and England's possessions. You see?"

Vail reached for another cigarette. His hand shook.

"It's tremendous!" he declared. "Why, if Santos wins, there will be no counting the millions in it! The New Yorkers get the rubber concession in return for their money backing?"

"Yes," Barrone answered softly; "and I the Ministry of the Interior for Saragonda, with the consequent privilege of awarding that and other concessions."

The bigness of the thing astounded Vail. He drew in and exhaled great volumes of the cigarette smoke.

"Who else is in on it at this end?" he asked then.

There were no limits to Barrone's frankness.

"You've met them both," he said, "Forney and von Palz. Forney represents the New Yorkers. We had to have von Palz because of his experience in Latin America. He and the money he's put in won over the New York crowd."

"And the guns? The ammunition?"

"That," Barrone informed him, "is my special task; to get them there by steamer."

Vail considered. The plot was full hatched. All that was needed was the promise of coöperation from Barfield. He saw that he had been approached only at the moment when he was needed.

"Now as to Barfield," he inquired; "when am I to speak to him?"

Barrone waved his hand, a careless gesture putting the responsibility on Vail.

"Prepare the way as you please," he said. "It will be three weeks or possibly a month before we must have his definite promise to recognize Santos as president the moment he wins his first battle. You see, our friends will not dispatch the money to pay the Santos troops without that absolute guarantee of American recognition. With this government for Lestrada, we might have trouble overthrowing him. But with it on our side, with the way thus thrown

open for further shipments of arms and money to General Santos, Lestrada won't last a week."

"But why this delay, three weeks or a month?"

"Because an agent has yet to bring from General Santos the news of his secret enrollment of sufficient troops, the word that he is ready to strike when I give him the signal, and certain documents, his signed agreement to the terms, the rubber concession to our friends, the Ministry of the Interior to me."

Vail struck the arm of his chair with his fist.

"A big game?" he exclaimed. "It's the biggest thing of its kind ever played out of Washington! The stakes—." He checked himself considering the point he had overlooked. "And my stake?" he inquired. "What am I to get? And when?"

Barrone drew out a pocket notebook.

"As I told you," he said, "it will mean a lot of money to you. Let's figure it."

CHAPTER II

THE SECRET AGENT

Instead of three weeks, almost five had passed before the four men—Barrone, Forney, Vail and von Palz—could assemble in the lounge of the Q Street house to await the arrival of General Santos' messenger. Word had at last come through that Miss Margarita Domenza, the most trusted of all the leader's secret agents, was to be expected at nine o'clock Sunday evening.

Von Palz had disapproved of that.

"Are they crazy down there? No common sense?" he growled, having trouble with his "c's" and "th's," as he always did when excited. "A woman! Is she any good?"

"She is so good, Count," Barrone reassured him, "that nobody except Santos himself knows who she is. His confidence in her is absolute. She is, I believe, a Saragondan who was educated in Europe. So far as I know, I've never laid eyes on her. She is, in fact, a secret agent."

Although it was a warm evening in late May, shades and heavy curtains were drawn so tightly over the windows of the room that not a pin-point of light was visible from the street. It was a luxuriously equipped

apartment running across the full width of the house and lighted by the soft glow from shaded wall lamps. Back of the chairs in front of the fireplace stood a long table, at one end of which a small reading light, with its copper shade beaten so thin that it looked like an amber bubble, made a little puddle of radiance on the gleaming mahogany. Chairs were scattered about, deep and cushiony, seductive of rest. Along the rear wall, bisected by the entrance door, ran two wide couches with masses of silk-covered pillows. The deep pile of the rugs made footsteps noiseless. The aroma of good cigars and cigarettes hung in the air.

At five minutes past nine the waiting men had given up all pretense of conversation. Suspense had hold of them. They wondered what type of woman this messenger would be, what had delayed her, what story she would tell of new difficulties or unexpected advantages. Their future was literally in her hands.

Vail, seated near the long table, pretended to read a magazine. Barrone, near-by in a cloud of cigarette smoke, recited mentally the questions which, according to a plan agreed on by himself and General Santos months ago, he was to ask the messenger in order to prove her identity and good faith.

Von Palz had struck a match to light a fresh cigar when the sound of the front door bell drifted up.

Vail was instantly on his feet.

"I'll admit her!" he said, and hurried out.

"Acts like a nervous man!" Forney exclaimed from

his seat on the couch to the left of the door, accompanying the remark with a forced laugh.

He was round-faced and jovial, the tin-pan type of man: life was always striking exclamations from him.

Barrone looked at the German count and smiled, with the corners of his lips. Von Palz, who had short, whitish hair that stood up like separate wires from his head, blinked his keen little eyes behind the heavy lenses of his spectacles, and finished the lighting of his cigar. He was heavily built, with massive shoulders. Despite an obvious coarseness, he had an air.

"Suffering stars!" Forney exclaimed again. "I'm glad she's here. In the last five minutes I've waited ten years!"

Downstairs the wide entrance hall was dark save for a glimmer of light from a small lamp in the drawing-room. Vail, putting his hand on the knob, had drawn the front door hardly a third open when the woman who had rung slipped in and, brushing him to one side, quickly swung it shut.

"I beg your pardon," she said, "but the less time it took me to enter——"

She broke off there, but her tone had made her meaning so plain that Vail finished the sentence for her.

"The less risk there was of anybody's seeing you come in," he said.

She did not answer that, and for a moment he was at a loss. In spite of the darkness, he was aware that

she had put up both hands to her hair, judicious fingers ministering to her coiffure; that a hand-bag, whose beads caught a ray of the dim light, had slipped back from her left wrist to the elbow of the bare arm, and that a perfume, strange to him and faintly perceptible, had come with her into the hall.

"You are," he ventured then, "Miss Domenza?"

"And you are?" she returned.

Her voice, round and full, almost contralto on the low notes, carried the soft, hardly distinguishable blur of the Parisian or Latin-American speech.

Her refusal to identify herself there brought him up short.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Follow me, please."

When he stood aside and ushered her into the lounge, the three men sprang to their feet. (She wore no hat, and her long black cape of some thin, shimmering material fell open from her neck and shoulders, displaying her black evening gown with its wide crimson girdle. Standing there in the doorway, entirely at her ease, her eyes behind slightly puckered lids accustomed to the light, she was a tall and distinguished figure. The rich furnishings of the room, the men in dinner clothes, their evident surprise and admiration as they studied her beauty—she took it all in and smiled.)

"Miss—?" Barrone, bowing over her hand, made the one word of greeting an inquiry.

"Margarita Domenza," she said simply.

He bowed again. "Miss Domenza, we are so delighted to see you! But allow me!"

He presented the others, Vail last, and drew up a chair for her so that the long table would be between her and the fireplace.

She was pleasantly aware of the homage of their interest. Her dark gray eyes had softened to blue. A delicate pink showed under the slight olive of her cheeks. Her wavy black hair, parted in the middle and gathered back over her ears, broke into curls at her temples and the back of her neck. Her lips were a natural deep scarlet. But with her beauty there was at once perceptible an air of efficiency. It was in her assured and vivacious grace of movement. The low, firm and rounded bust, the high carriage of her head, the easy swing of her arms in their sockets, her whole physique proclaimed strength and endurance.

Unconsciously the four men had drawn up chairs at the opposite side of the table so that they faced her across it, as if to lose no opportunity of observing her.

"There is first, I suppose," she began, a quick glance sweeping the row of their faces, "the matter of identification." She paused, and added the first phrase of the formula previously agreed on by Barrone and Santos: "It is to do with Saragonda and the future of Saragonda."

"A glorious and assured future," Barrone gave her the reply, "with the aid of Miss—whom shall I say?"

"Margarita Domenza of Maramasca."

"And you had no difficulty on the way?"

"From Olua to Havana the sea was rough," she replied, putting the fore and middle fingers of her right hand across the back of her left hand.

Barrone, who had waited for the gesture, said solemnly:

"Without the fear of pursuit, or punishment, or threat, or capture, we shall for the sake of Saragonda——"

"Make our way to the end," she concluded the formula, "which shall be victory."

She sat willowy straight in her chair, her breast rising and falling to her quickened breathing, a resolute look in her eyes, which now were a clear gray.

"And there is something else," Barrone reminded her.

"Yes."

She put up her hands, slender fingers probing the roll of her hair just above the nape of her neck.

Forney leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table, the fingers of his locked hands lacing and interlacing. The German's breathing through his mouth was audible. The four men watched her closely as, with glance over their heads, her fingers flashed in and out of her hair.

Without disarranging her coiffure, she drew forth something that looked like a quill and handed it to Barrone.

He unrolled it, a very thin, flexible kodak photo-

graph an inch and a half square perhaps, and, taking a glass from his pocket of his waistcoat, stood up, studying the photograph through the glass.

In the silence that ensued Vail's eyes met the girl's. He had never experienced anything like that look of hers, its frank and purposeful revelation. It was as if, in some strangely effective way, there were no longer any bars between them. He knew as well as if she had told him in words that, back of her efficiency and business-like grasp of this situation, was her need of help, of understanding support, and that, in an emergency, she would turn to him as one of her kind. She looked away and left him thinking: "She is so young! She is so young to be in this sort of thing!" He estimated her age, deciding that she could not possibly be more than twenty-five. He had the feeling that he knew her well, a sensation which he did not try to analyze.

"You may see for yourselves," Barrone was telling his associates, "that this is a photograph of Miss Domenza. I shall first read you what is written on it." He brought picture and glass closer to his eyes, reading the words written in a thin, spidery and extremely small hand: "'A volunteer in a movement which contemplates freedom and happiness for many—'" He turned the photograph and continued reading from its back: "'—people now wretched and oppressed.'"

He passed the picture to the others for their in-

spection, explaining: "Those are the words which, I knew months ago, would be written exactly as they are there, partly on the face, partly on the back, of the photograph of the messenger to be sent to us at this time by General Santos."

He bowed deeply to the girl, his expression unchanged. He showed elation as seldom as he gave way to disappointment.

"Gentlemen," he said, "there is no room for fear or uncertainty. This is Miss Margarita Domenza, General Santos' most trusted agent."

Forney could contain himself no longer.

"Fine!" he exclaimed, moving restlessly in his chair. "Then you've got news for us, Miss Domenza?"

Miss Domenza's glance touched him, then Barrone.

"Yes," the latter prompted. "Tell us, please."

She told the story vividly, with a growing enthusiasm.

"General Santos," she began, "is ready to strike. Within ten days after he receives the signal from us he can put troops into Olua, the port city, and into Quezalango, the capital."

She sketched the figures. Half of President Lestrada's standing army of four thousand men was ready to desert to the revolutionists. Their officers would come over with them. In addition, Santos had three thousand men, most of them fairly well drilled. He had raised them, particularly in the interior provinces, under the pretense of making them militiamen to support Lestrada's regulars. But the revolutionists'

crying need was arms and ammunition. It was absolutely essential to their victory that the boat carrying the arms and munitions intended for them should reach Olua simultaneously with the arrival there of the Santos troops.

"Fine! Fine!" Forney said, and squirmed in his chair. "Couldn't be better!"

"Yes," Barrone declared, pocketing the photograph which von Palz had returned to him; "it is excellent. Miss Domenza, may I?" He indicated the cigarette in his hand.

"By all means," she gave permission.

Von Palz relit his cigar without taking his eyes from her face.

"Yes; it is excellent," he echoed Barrone's commendation. "So far, so good, Miss Domenza. But the documents? The preliminary grant of those rubber concessions from General Santos to the gentlemen? You have them?"

She smiled at his anxiety.

"I brought them with me, Count von Palz," she assured him; "but, for the present, they are in a safe place, to be delivered when the American Government's promise of recognition is obtained." She turned to Barrone. "That is the understanding?"

Barrone agreed with her. Von Palz sank back into his chair with a grunt.

"All the same," he said unhappily, "I should like to see them as soon as possible."

Barrone changed the subject.

"Now," he suggested, "you spoke, Miss Domenza, of the signal to be cabled to General Santos. You mean, of course, the code message telling him that this country's recognition is assured and the hour of the ammunition boat's sailing and the scheduled date of its arrival at Olua?"

"Yes," she replied, "the signal to him to march."

"What is that signal, the code message?"

"I am to send it," she answered.

Barrone eyed her a moment in silence.

"But it was to be given to me," he said gently.

Miss Domenza's chin went up the fraction of an inch.

"You were satisfied a moment ago, Mr. Barrone," she reminded him, her gentleness matching his, "that I had the complete confidence of General Santos. His instructions to me are that, upon being convinced of the good faith of America and the readiness of the ammunition boat to sail, I am to send him that code signal. I can't disobey my instructions."

His features stiffened.

"But I, alone," he declared, "know where the boat is, when her cargo can be put aboard and when she can reach Olua."

"You are to tell me when it is all in readiness," she said simply.

Barrone got suddenly to his feet. He stood inclined over the table toward her. Immaculate in his

dinner clothes, his hand holding his cigarette without a tremor, he seemed nevertheless threatening. His lithe strength was somehow accentuated by his posture.

"You mean, Miss Domenza," he inquired, with a tight-lipped smile, "that you are sent here as my superior?"

She scanned the faces of the others—Forney, jovially enigmatic; the German apprehensive of a disagreement hurtful to his prospects; Vail smilingly sympathetic. Then she looked up and measured glances with Barrone.

"I mean," she explained, without a trace of feeling, "we are to work together."

"And that means?"

"It means," she answered serenely, "that General Santos doesn't wish to increase your or anybody else's responsibilities unnecessarily. Besides, I must know the name and location of the ammunition ship. I have a message from General Santos for—you know the man I mean."

Barrone resumed his seat, and crushed the fire from his cigarette on the ash tray beside him. Save for the tightening of his mouth, he gave no sign of the anger he felt.

"You will receive that information, Miss Domenza," he said with undoubted finality, "when I am given the code signal which you have just refused me."

She was, so far as appearances went, undisturbed.

A smile of conciliation touched her lips as her glance took in the expressions of the other three.

"After all, Mr. Barrone," she pointed out, "it is a matter that we can discuss later."

Vail was moved to go to her assistance. He took out his watch and consulted it.

"I'm sure," he addressed her, "we will all agree to that. But there is hardly time for discussion to-night. There is the question of your getting safely back to your hotel."

Barrone was again all smoothness.

"Yes, Miss Domenza," he said. "Which is your hotel?"

She stood up and made the announcement simply:

"The Saragondan Legation."

The men laughed spontaneously, charmed by the audacity of the thing.

"Ah!" Barrone said on a purring note. "You are there, I suppose, as an ardent friend of the Lestrada Government?"

"Yes," she answered; "both my mother and myself."

Her accent of the word "mother" was inimitably clever; it made mannikins of the four men and left them dangling on the strings of doubt. At one moment they thought it meant: "Not, of course, my mother, but an ancient dame who, for a financial consideration, adopts that relationship toward me, thereby giving me greater security and effectiveness in my

work." At another they translated it: "My mother, though I love her dearly, knows nothing of my real business in Washington." And something in her manner, the demureness of her mouth, the lift of an eyebrow, inhibited their further inquiry regarding it. It was the beginning of Vail's education in her capacity for keeping a conversation in her own hands, the putting on of an armor of subtlety.

Barrone was still smiling when he asked the next question:

"And you come and go as you please?"

"I do!" she said, in smiling appreciation of the situation. "And why shouldn't I? Mother—" Again the enigmatic accenting of the word. "—and I are Parisians, you are to understand, old friends of the Minister when he was stationed in Paris. He has made that announcement at my request, at the slightest of hints from me that it might be for the good of Saragonda, that it might avoid difficulties in the future."

Forney exploded at that.

"Singing angels!" he said. "You are great!"

Barrone bowed to her.

"Your methods," he said, without a trace of antagonism, "are perfect."

CHAPTER III

THE APPEAL

Late in the forenoon of the following day Carston Vail presented himself at the palatial Saragondan Legation on R Street and sent in his card to Miss Domenza. The door man, who relieved him of hat and stick, showed him into a small room on the ground floor overlooking a formal garden brilliant with tulips and the purple and pink of hyacinths. He was standing by the open window when she came in, herself suggestive of flower-like freshness in a morning dress of white serge, a single red rose at her breast.

She was the first to speak.

"Ah, Mr. Vail!" she said for the benefit of the servant who, having ushered her into the room, was at that moment dropping the golden-brown velvet door-hangings behind her. "It is good of you to come so promptly about my little affairs. I had no idea——"

He took the cue at once.

"Your affairs 'little'!" he protested. "Impossible! It so happened that I was able to find immediately the information you wanted. Naturally, I didn't delay in bringing it."

He paused, listening to the man's footsteps receding down the hall.

"If you don't mind?" he said and, taking her consent for granted, lifted the hangings to press the spring in the face of the sliding door, drawing it shut.

He was longer about it than necessary. Now that he was alone with her, he was disturbed for the first time by the idea that she might consider his errand the rankest presumption. This clever masking of her surprise at a call for which she as yet had no explanation made her seem so entirely capable of managing her own affairs! His realization of this phase of her, though a renewal of his last evening's impression, came upon him at this prosaic hour of the morning with the force of a new discovery.

She led the way across the room and sat down near the open window, a light breeze, perfume-laden, stirring the curls at her temples, her wide-set eyes grave now after the laughing byplay at the door. She was obviously curious as to the reason for his coming.

He made haste to inform her.

"I'm afraid," he began apologetically, "that you'll be inclined, at first at any rate, to consider me rather presumptuous in what I have come to say."

He was unmistakably confused, his cheeks flushed. A distinct appeal sounded in the resonant barytone of his voice.

"Presumptuous?" she repeated.

Her left eyebrow suddenly lifted, the effect being a whimsicality of expression, a light and flitting incredulity.

He forced himself to go on.

"But, my excuse is a concern for you, an anxiety, perhaps, which I've been unable to dismiss from my mind. I've never experienced anything just like it. Never! It is as if I had known you a long time. I— You will bear with me while I explain?"

"Of course," she said graciously.

"It's odd," he continued, "the way I feel about this, about you, Miss Domenza. It has amounted to an obsession. I had to come—felt a compulsion! The fact is——"

He stopped and put out both hands, a swift gesture of impatience at his own inarticulateness. He was unconscionably embarrassed, he who was so seldom devoid of a charming *savoir faire*.

"The fact is," he began again, "that in a relation, in a business such as ours, the only sensible course is frankness, unqualified frankness. And I'm sure you won't misunderstand what I have to say, won't attribute it to a light or unimportant motive. It all comes down to this: I wish you would let us finish up what has to be done."

She was amazed.

"Let you finish what has to be done?" she asked vaguely. "Just what do you mean?"

The challenge brought back his courage. His confusion gave place to a solicitude for her which she could not misinterpret. He was very gentle.

"I don't believe," he explained, "that you realize

the extent and immediacy of our danger, your danger. Think a moment. There have been so many of these attempted revolutions in Latin America. The factions and 'juntas' here and in New York and New Orleans. A 'general' or a 'patriot' as the window-dressing of the show. A shrewd American to raise funds. Promises of concessions to the men doing the financing. Mysterious messengers guaranteeing America's recognition. Gun-running. Some of them have succeeded, I grant you. Americans have amassed money as reward for sending down a boatload of guns. But the Washington authorities are on the watch now. Anybody playing such a game is momentarily in danger."

She was sceptical.

"In danger of what?" she retorted, the thin edge of contempt on her words.

"Of assassination upon return to the native country, of imprisonment and disgrace here," he said incisively.

"But," she objected, "the Santos movement in Saragonda isn't even suspected. It has been over a year in the making. Not a detail has been overlooked, not a contingency unprovided for. In Saragonda and here the plan is failure-proof. We can't fail!"

He laughed on a high note, deprecating his insistence.

"They have all said that, the failures as well as the successes. And the failures have so outnumbered the

successes! Almost always there has been too much talk, or a Government secret agent too smart, or too little money to swing the thing."

She rose and, going to the window, stood there thinking, the fingertips of both hands drumming the sill.

"I confess you surprise me," she gave him cool rebuke after a long pause, without looking at him.

He, too, rose and, standing behind her, talked over her shoulder.

"I surprise myself," he admitted. "But I must say what I came to say. The obsession still holds. If you were not you, it wouldn't have entered my mind."

She turned sharply and faced him in undisguised wonder. He fell back a step, but persisted.

"You are so young!" he said with a bow which somehow robbed his words of the possibility of offense. "You are so ardent and alive! You have so much to live for that I can't bear to see it all staked on the turn of the dice in this sordid game of ours. Forgive me," he begged; "I do so want you to understand! I'm sure you will. Certainly you see that I am not trying to trifle, that I feel deeply, and with a respect for you that is reverence, everything I say. You are so beautiful, so altogether lovely! Ah, Miss Domenza, give me the signal code that Barrone wants! Let me have the job of finding where the ammunition ship is and delivering the message to the man there. Leave all that to me, and get out of this affair!"

He fell back another step and stood looking into her eyes, his glance beseeching her.

He had impressed her. His eager, flashing gestures, his undeniable anxiety for her sake, the earnestness in his low, vibrant voice, even the tenseness of his tall, slender figure leaning toward her as if to protect—seeing all that, she had thought not of the potency of his arguments, but of the high, unselfish purpose that animated him.

Catching something of her mood, he tried to press his advantage.

“For me,” he added, with the nervous laugh far back in his throat, like an apology, “it is a game, the sort of thing I love. If I win, I get the thrill I’m looking for. If I lose—” He snapped his fingers. “But I’ll win!”

“Ah!” she cried out, and struck the window sill with her left hand. “Then you understand! I, too, love the thrill of the game. All through my girlhood I wanted life! Real life! The romance of adventure! Something to try one’s mind, to test one’s will, to develop one’s resourcefulness! To feel my heart beat high, to play with danger, and always to conquer it! You talk of the turn of the dice. Well, I wanted the dice of life in my hands, to take what the throw won or lost! And now, with the throw made, with other throws to be made, Mr. Vail, I shall see the game through. I am happy only in seeing it through!”

It flashed upon him that she had repeated, almost word for word, what he had said to Barrone seven weeks ago.

Her loveliness was upon him like a fascination. He felt all the more profoundly his desire to shield her from the possibility of distress.

"But it isn't so easy," he objected. "Already there is the disagreement between you and Mr. Barrone. He controlled himself admirably last night, but I know him. Believe me, Miss Domenza, he means to force you to give him the signal code for General Santos' marching on Olua and Quezalango."

She sat down again.

"He's powerless in that," she retorted indifferently. "He knows, as well as I do, that I am supreme there. He may resent it, but the fact remains: i am the General's representative outside of Saragonda."

He shook his head.

"You underestimate him. If there is one way for him to annoy you, to compel you to give in to him, he will find it."

She laughed her disdain, and indicated the cigarettes on the table.

"Won't you smoke?"

"Don't think me altogether hopeless," he pursued, selecting a cigarette, "if I ask you one more question. What is your motive for refusing what I ask? Let me phrase it this way: suppose I assure you that we

men can put this thing through, that I will not give Barrone or anybody else the signal code and will use it as you direct—what then?”

“The same answer,” she said, a new solemnity in her tone. “Mr. Vail, I love Saragonda. She is my country. I know she has been the spoil and the toy of unscrupulous and wicked men. Her people, my people, are kept in ignorance and poverty, and are threatened with even worse afflictions, by such men. And now, when I have an opportunity to help in putting an end to it, you ask me to step out, to take my hand from the play! Not for all the threats and risks imaginable! Not under any inducement!” She threw up her head, a brave defiance. “No, my friend; I am in to the finish, the finish I have so wished for. I thank you for your thoughtfulness, but—” she smiled, “—I stay in.”

“After that,” he surrendered, “what can I say? But what I have said, I had to say. And I want you to understand that I couldn’t have spoken to any other woman on earth as I have to you. Nevertheless, and naturally, I suppose, you think me a meddler, a very stupid meddler.”

She cried out against that, and, slipping forward to the edge of her chair, put up an emphasizing hand.

“I think nothing of the sort, Mr. Vail!” she disclaimed. “I think you a very kind and chivalric man, and, even though I cannot do what you ask, I deeply appreciate the suggestion.”

"Then it stands at this: I am always at your service, and you are not to hesitate to call on me if you need help of any kind."

"Yes," she promised; "and I am more than grateful. You are living now in the Q Street house with Barrone?"

"Yes. But von Palz is at the Wareham, and Forney has an apartment on Eighteenth Street."

She was silent a moment. Her glance reminded him of the look she had given him the night before, that long and singularly revealing gaze, free of any suggestion of sex appeal but proclaiming a *camaraderie* with him.

"Another question, if I may?" she said then.

He laughed gayly.

"A hundred if you like!"

"It is this," she explained. "What is your next step? Why can't things be hurried? This inactivity is, after all, not what one would wish."

"Oh," he said disconsolately, "if you only weren't subject to such annoyance! But forgive me; I'm not trying to reopen the argument, not trying to ask you again to leave the work to others." He explained: "I've promised, at Mr. Barrone's request, to see Mr. Barfield again late this afternoon, but, for your own information, there's no chance of hurrying things. None whatever."

"You told us that last night," she reminded him. "You said it would be at least a week before Mr. Bar-

field could promise definitely the recognition we're asking. But you didn't explain the necessity of the delay. Will you tell me now?"

"Why, yes. The others understood. I thought you did. Barfield is awaiting certain reports from one of the American consuls in Saragonda. He must have facts—'facts,' you understand—to support his recommendation to the Administration. There is no real doubt about it. Barfield's mind is made up, but he must have all his cards in his hand before he takes the last and biggest trick. We can't expect the Administration to be guided by Barrone's reports alone."

"Yes; I understand that."

He rose to take his leave, anxiety again in his eyes.

"Don't forget," he urged, putting out his hand. "I am always at your service. Unless I'm greatly mistaken, the time will come when you'll need help. Barrone will do all he can to force you to give him the code signal. He will have his way if he can."

"The insurmountable 'if'!" she said lightly.

She also stood up and, shaking hands with him, asked an unexpected question.

"And his secret? The ammunition boat. You, too, really are kept in ignorance as to its location?"

"I am," he answered, and added, with a laugh that took the edge off his persistence; "but I'd gladly volunteer to discover it if you'd turn over the whole business to——"

She laughed in mock horror.

"You are incorrigible!"

At the door he turned and issued an ultimatum.

"By the way," he announced, his eyes twinkling, "I've changed our mind about one of our policies. We all agreed last night, you'll remember, that, to avoid the possibility of suspicion, it would be wisest for you to be seen as rarely as possible with any of us four men. The idea's absurd. It is borne in upon me that, for your own protection and my good, I should see you as often as I can find excuse for."

She detected the real concern under the levity of his manner, and appreciated it.

"We shall see," she said pleasantly, "later on."

When he had gone, she went to the oval mirror hanging above the mantelpiece and studied her reflection in it. Her eyes saddened.

"He is so fine!" she thought. "And he thinks he knows me!"

She sighed.

CHAPTER IV

CHANCE AND MISCHANCE

Count Otto von Palz was host to a poker party that Monday evening in his suite at the Wareham, the Washington hotel above all others frequented by the diplomats and wealthy politicians. Carston Vail, coming in by the F Street entrance at ten minutes past nine, made his way slowly down the long corridor-lounge called Peacock Alley. Knowing everybody who was anybody, he always enjoyed this scene.

Although the oppressively warm weather was near at hand, Congress was still in session, and officialdom had not begun its annual pilgrimage to cooler places. Consequently, the "Alley," a babel of talk and laughter and brilliant with the women's evening costumes, was crowded with Members of Congress, diplomats and their ladies.

Vail, bowing to right and left, was stopped several times by matrons who valued him as an addition to their social functions. As he neared the lobby he saw the Saragondan Minister and Madame Bonilla in the midst of a group with whom they had had dinner in the Palm Room. She summoned him with a nod to her side. Madame, a large woman and too fat but blessed with easily discernible remnants of good

looks, was a successful figure in capital Society. Her popularity was by no means confined to the Latin American set.

"I continue to spoil you!" she told Vail graciously. "Because the temptation's irresistible, perhaps? Anyway you are the one man in Washington who can offer no acceptable excuse for absence from my ball Wednesday evening. You will be there?"

He bowed.

"I shall, Madame," he assured her with a pleased laugh, "if I have to swim through a wreck of worlds! But where is your charming house guest? And her mother?"

"Miss Domenza? You've already met her, she tells me, which is delightful. She had an appointment that interfered with her dining here, and I believe she's at the theater with her mother."

He passed on, wishing that he had thought to offer himself as escort to Miss Domenza's theater trip.

"Still," he reflected, "that wouldn't have been possible tonight. However, there are other evenings. And afternoons! Golf at Chevy Chase, for instance. It's an ideal!"

In the parlor of von Palz's suite he found Barrone, Forney, the German and two of Forney's friends at the card table, the game already well under way. After one quick glance at his face, Barrone took no notice of his arrival beyond a word of casual greeting. He had scarcely closed the door, however, when For-

ney left his chair and signaled him to follow into an adjoining room.

"Liquids, fluids and beverages in there!" Forney remarked, to explain his departure. "Always good stuff before drawing cards. Boosts the optimism and the other man's winnings!"

Von Palz without a word joined them.

With the door shut behind them, they spoke cautiously, in low tones.

"Did you see Barfield?" Forney asked.

"I did," Vail replied, patently impatient.

"Well?" Forney pressed him. "Will he hurry things up?"

"As I told you last night," Vail informed him, "he can't hurry more than he has done. We've got a week to wait. He insists, and very properly, I think, that he can't act before he gets those reports from his agent at Olua."

"But, my friend," the German interposed on a critical note, "can't you handle him?" The "you" was unpleasantly accented.

"Suffering crime!" Forney complained. "My nerves are raw! I'm jumpy, with this business of feeling day after day, week after week, that any minute some fellow in a black derby hat and rubber-soled shoes is apt to tap me on the shoulder and say, 'Come with me!' If we can cut out a few days of it, let's do it!"

"How, for instance?" Vail retorted grimly, and at once regretted his tone.

He was amazed to find his hands clenched in his effort to avoid being disagreeable. He had been unaware of it before, but the suspense of which Forney complained was taking its toll of him also.

"That's your job," Forney reminded him.

Vail turned to the door, bringing the colloquy to an end.

"I'm doing everything I can," he said, looking Forney in the eye; "and I think you know it."

It was half-past nine o'clock when they joined the others at the card table. Downstairs in the lobby at that moment a newcomer was signing her name on the register: "J. Whiteur—New York." Direct and business-like to a degree, she was evidently a woman accustomed to traveling alone.

"The Casavante wired ahead for accommodations for me," she told the room clerk, speaking with a markedly foreign accent; "a room and bath on the second or third floor." She handed him a baggage check. "My trunk should be here in a few minutes."

A pronounced brunette of the Latin-American type, she had a rather plain face, which was redeemed by her eyes, black and sparkling. As she crossed the lobby, her trim figure of medium height attracted little attention from the men in the lobby.

Assigned to room Number 327 on the third floor, she gave the bellboy who carried up her suit-case and hat-box a liberal tip. While he turned on lights and saw to the windows, she went to the telephone table and

consulted the directory which she drew from the drawer. As soon as he had left the room, she took down the receiver and asked for a number.

At ten minutes past eleven o'clock Mr. Carlos Lemale, private secretary to Alberto Barrone, came through the main, or Pennsylvania Avenue, entrance of the Wareham and, crossing the lobby with rapid step, inquired at the desk for the number of Miss Josephine Whiteur's room. Announcing, in spite of the late hour, that he was expected, Mr. Lemale was delivered to the guardianship of a bellboy who piloted him to the elevator and thence to room Number 327.

The boy's repeated knocks on the door were unanswered.

"Try the knob," Mr. Lemale finally suggested.

The boy, preparing to rattle the latch, found the knob turning in his hand and swung the door ajar. When it was a third open, he knocked again, and again there was no answer. By this time he felt a chilly sensation at the base of his skull.

Closely followed by Lemale, he opened the door wider and stepped into the room. Man and boy simultaneously perceived the reason for the silence which the prolonged knocking had been unable to break. At the foot of the bed and to the left of the door a woman had crumpled to the floor, lying on her left side with her knees drawn up to her waist.

The boy, suddenly white, wheeled to make a break from the room.

"Wait!" the man said sharply, catching him by the arm and thrusting him forward.

Lemale knelt down, put his fingers to the woman's wrist and, after a brief wait with his head held to one side and his eyes on the boy, thrust his hand beneath her gown, seeking the heart. Her face was contorted and terribly discolored, in places almost black. It was easy to see that she had been strangled.

"She's dead," he said in an awe-stricken voice.

By this time his face was as pale as the bellboy's.

"Call the desk," he added, getting to his feet. "Ask for a doctor! Quick!"

While the boy telephoned, Lemale took out his handkerchief and laid it over the dead woman's face. Straightening up from that, he heard a noise in the still open doorway and turned to see a maid, eyes wild and jaw dropped, staring at him.

As if his eyes meeting hers had released her from stupefaction, she began to scream, at the same time advancing into the room.

"Shut up!" he said roughly, stopping the outcry at its beginning. "And shut the door."

He turned then to the boy in the act of hanging up the telephone receiver, and instructed him:

"Go up to the sixth floor, room six-thirty-one, and ask Mr. Barrone to come down here."

The boy went out with alacrity, leaving the door ajar. The maid, standing between the door and the dead woman, stared at Lemale.

He was a native Saragondan, a little above average height, and gaunt, with a short body and long legs and arms. His face was long and angular, lantern-jawed. As the woman looked at him, his thick lower lip trembled.

Leaning an elbow on the back of a chair, he glanced about the room. The window looking on the fire-escape was wide open, a strong breeze blowing the lace curtains far into the room. A suitcase on the floor between that window and the bed was open, its contents tumbled, half of them scattered on the rug, as if it had been hastily searched. Back of that, near the wall, a straight-backed chair had been overturned. The end of the rug nearest the bathroom was turned back, apparently kicked up by a foot slipping on the hardwood floor.

Lemale stepped to the open window and, leaning out, looked down at the dimly lighted alley below. That inspection discovering nothing, he examined the woodwork of the window ledge on which he at once saw a smear or dusty scar such as might have been left by the sole of a man's shoe when hastily turned with his full weight on it. He was bending over it when the night manager of the hotel and a clerk rushed into the room.

They were followed quickly and successively by Dr. Frazer, the house physician; the house detective and a uniformed policeman summoned from the street outside the hotel; Barrone, looking bored, and the bell-

boy. The doctor bent over the dead woman, the others, except Barrone and Lemale, crowding close about the body.

The talk, excited and exclamatory, grew constantly louder until Oxnard, the manager, took command.

Barrone had, immediately upon entering the room, crossed over to Lemale at the window, and now, after a murmured exchange of words with his secretary, was on the point of leaving. Oxnard addressed him.

"Do—did you know her?"

"I don't know," Barrone replied evenly. "Who is she?"

The clerk supplied that information.

"She registered as J. Whiteur," he said, "from New York."

"No," Barrone answered Oxnard's question. "I never heard of her."

His hands in the pockets of his dinner jacket, he met the other's gaze with a slight frown, as though questioning the necessity of his answering at all.

"But," the manager objected irritably, "this boy says that gentleman," he pointed to Lemale, "sent for you as soon as he discovered the—what had happened!"

Barrone shrugged his shoulders.

"I have yet to know why," he said.

"And you?" the manager addressed Lemale, who had not moved from the window. "Do you know who she is?"

"No," Lemale answered. "I haven't the faintest idea."

The house detective stooped and removed Lemale's handkerchief from the dead woman's face.

"Now," Oxnard urged Barrone, "do you know her? Ever seen her?"

Barrone raised his eyebrows.

"I repeat," he declared, "I know neither her nor anything about her."

"But, if you don't know her," Oxnard insisted, "why should you have been sent for just now?"

Barrone's smile had a goading quality. His reply was bitingly suave.

"My dear sir," he said, "how can I tell? However, it wouldn't be the first instance of an employee finding himself in a disturbing situation and sending for his employer."

At that, without another glance at Lemale, he turned on **his** heel and left the room, shouldering his way through the crowd in the corridor outside. The impression he conveyed was of keen resentment at having been subjected to a disagreeable scene through the stupidity of an inferior and presuming person.

Mr. Carlos Lemale foresaw an unpleasant half-hour.

CHAPTER V

MR. WILLOUGHBY CALLS

Mr. Vail was on the point of leaving the Q Street house for the purpose of stopping at the Saragondan Legation and persuading Miss Margarita Domenza that she could do nothing better a few hours later than play a game of golf with him on the links of the Chevy Chase Country Club. He stood before his dresser mirror, putting a last, meticulous touch to the already impeccable set of his tie when Finney, Barrone's major domo, brought him a card. In addition to the correctly engraved "Mr. Eugene Willoughby," it bore the penciled line: "From detective headquarters."

Vail, a thin line of perplexity between his eyebrows, was still considering it when Barrone noiselessly entered the room.

"Tell him I'll be down in a moment," Vail dismissed Finney.

Barrone betrayed no excitement. His smile was sardonic.

"I've just talked to this detective," he began. "Rather, he's just tried to talk to me. Do you know what he wants?"

Vail shook his head.

"Not being a trick mind reader, no."

"He would like to know whether our acquaintance includes any Saragondan women who have recently come to Washington."

Vail squared his shoulders.

"Why?" he inquired sharply.

"He didn't explain. I'm afraid the reception he got from me discouraged expansiveness on his part."

"And you gave him no information?"

Barrone shrugged.

"I had none to give him," he said significantly; "as, of course, you have none. However, avoiding his all-seeing eye, I came up here to inform you. I thought you'd like to know in advance what his game is."

Vail laughed, without merriment.

"Thanks; yes," he said. "That will make it all the more enjoyable."

Mr. Eugene Willoughby was of the new school of detectives, college-trained and a man of brains, as much at home on a ballroom floor as in a police station-house. Young, snappily dressed in a dark gray business suit and carrying light gray gloves and a crook-handled walking stick, he stood with his back to the empty fireplace in the drawing-room, an alert, keen-eyed and pleasantly smiling fellow. Barring a certain thickishness in wrist and ankle, he was well made, wiry of figure.

"I'm here, Mr. Vail," he explained affably, "to ask your help, which I'm sure you'll be glad to give me."

"Undoubtedly, if I can," Vail agreed, and held out a silver cigarette case. "Have one, won't you?"

"Thanks very much," the visitor accepted the cigarette, lighting it from the proffered match.

"And now," Vail inquired as they sat down with a small table between them, "how can I serve you?"

Mr. Willoughby turned to put his hat, gloves and stick on a chair beside him before replying to that.

"Naturally," he suggested then, "Mr. Barrone has told you what I'm after?"

Vail looked surprised.

"Mr. Barrone," he explained, "is in the office across the hall there. I've just come down from my room."

"No matter," the detective said carelessly. "It's about the Whiteur woman's murder at the Wareham last night. I'm the detective assigned to the case."

"The Whiteur murder!" Vail exclaimed. "It's an interesting case, I gather; but I know nothing on earth about it."

Mr. Willoughby smiled encouragingly.

"I expected you to say that," he admitted; "but my hope is that you'll change your mind as soon as you're in possession of all the facts as I know them this far. In the end, I'll ask your opinion, if you'll allow me?"

"Very well," Vail acquiesced genially, and settled back in his chair; "though I'm afraid your story will be far more interesting than anything I can say."

"Thanks. I'll be brief as possible. Here's what we've been able to discover: Carlos Lemale, accord-

ing to his statement to me, was in the office there—" he indicated the room across the hall. "—at nine-thirty o'clock last evening. The telephone rang. A woman asked for Mr. Alberto Barrone. Mr. Barrone was out. She then asked for Mr. Carston Vail."

The detective paused on that, as if affording his hearer opportunity to comment. Vail, his lips slightly parted as was his habit when interested, watched him with grave eyes and neither spoke nor moved.

"Then," Mr. Willoughby continued, having allowed the pause to become hardly perceptible, "the woman, plainly agitated, told Lemale that she was Miss Josephine Whiteur, a Saragondan. Said she needed assistance, money. If Mr. Barrone could hear her story, he'd be glad to accommodate her in her embarrassing situation, in which she found herself through no fault of her own. Lemale, wishing to protect his employer from annoyance, still professed himself unable to locate him. Thereupon she insisted on Lemale's calling on her at the Wareham."

Willoughby leaned forward to knock the ashes from his cigarette to a tray on the table, and apologized:

"You, of course, Mr. Vail, have probably had the gist of this from Mr. Lemale himself, but my attempt is to give you the picture as I have it. To proceed. Something in the woman's voice, her evident refinement and more evident distress, moved Lemale to accede to her request. But he had to get off important letters which Mr. Barrone had ordered mailed immediately.

It would be late, he told her, before he could reach her. She thanked him profusely, saying: 'Come up to my room. That will be better.' His arrival at the hotel and his subsequent discovery in company with the bellboy—all that is described in the morning papers. You've seen one?"

Vail's expression was one of absorbed interest.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Naturally."

Willoughby's smile was ingratiating.

"Just a moment more," he promised, "and you will see which way we are headed. Other facts bearing on this mystery of who committed the murder are few, at present. A Wareham elevator boy, Ferguson, at ten-thirty last night carried up to the fourth floor a slender woman dressed in black and wearing a thin, black veil. He got the impression that she was a foreigner, but didn't see her features distinctly. He didn't lay eyes on her after that. Ten minutes earlier, on a downward trip, he saw a tall, thin man, wearing a gray hat with a black band, coming down the short corridor which leads from the elevator to the long corridor on which is situated room three-twenty-seven, the Whiteur room. Although this man seemed in a hurry, he shook his head, indicating that he did not want the elevator. And a clerk at the Wareham desk at nine-thirty, when Miss Whiteur registered, saw that she was followed into the elevator by a woman not registered at the hotel. She fits exactly Ferguson's description of the one he carried to the fourth floor

in his car at ten-thirty. Nobody has been found who saw the unknown woman in black after half-past ten."

The detective put the stump of his cigarette on the tray and leaned back, regarding his hearer expectantly.

Vail regarded him with equal expectancy.

"That's all we know," Willoughby broke the silence, during which Barrone's bass voice answering a telephone call was audible through the closed door of the office; "all except a footprint, or smear, indicating that a man left the Whiteur room some time last night by way of the fire-escape and the alley below. So we are up against this problem: did the unknown woman in black, whom nobody saw after ten-thirty, commit this murder, or was it done by some person, probably a man, who had followed her here from New York? I say from New York, because Miss Whiteur registered as being from there."

Vail, helping himself to another cigarette and offering one to Willoughby, who declined it, was indubitably immersed in thought.

"You have no more facts than that?" he asked.

"That's all. The fact that Lemale and the bellboy found the door of the Whiteur room unlocked makes it all the more peculiar. If somebody did the killing and left by the fire-escape, why didn't he, or she, lock the door to insure a safe retreat?"

"Yes," Vail agreed, worrying the problem. "And who is this mysterious dead woman? This Miss Whiteur? Did you cable to Saragonda?"

"Naturally; but we haven't had time yet to get an answer. New York knows nothing about her—under that name."

"What time did she die? Do you know that?"

"The doctors declare that she died between ten-thirty and eleven o'clock. Strangled, choked to death. There's a possibility, they say, that she may have died as early as ten-fifteen."

"And the woman in black? What's become of her?"

"Ah! Now!" the detective exclaimed eagerly. "There's where I hope you'll be able to help me."

Vail's eyes opened wide.

"I?" he inquired, incredulous.

"Yes. I'll explain. And I'll ask you, Mr. Vail, to regard my theory as confidential. Let the newspapers hear of it, and I'll get no credit for it if, as seems possible, it solves the mystery. I can depend on you?"

Vail bowed his head solemnly.

"Absolutely," he said.

"Thanks. Now, in a baffling case like this, you understand, the best we investigators can do is to look for a probable solution. The victim here is a Saragondan. The elevator boy, Ferguson, thinks the woman in black was a foreigner. If so, the probability is that she also was a Saragondan. Murders are not rare in Latin American squabbles. Plots in this country to overthrow rulers in Latin America also

are not rare. We assume, then, that Miss Whiteur's murder is the result of a Latin American, in fact a Saragondan, plot or row. And the assumption is bolstered by the fact that for the past few months newspaper dispatches from Quezalango and Olua, the principal cities of Saragonda, have told of widespread discontent down there."

Vail pondered this with pursed lips and squinting eyes.

"It's clever," he admitted, like a man forced to admire. "It is so clever that I don't, for the life of me, see how I can be of any help in elaborating it."

The detective came straight to the point.

"Your help will be incalculable," he said, "if you happen to know of any Saragondan woman who has recently come to Washington."

"But I don't," Vail objected regretfully.

"You've the reputation, though, of running a good deal with the Latin American crowd. You're a friend of Mr. Barrone's. You go to the Saragondan Legation. Dr. Bonilla, the Minister from Saragonda, is an acquaintance of yours."

"There is the fallacy in your reasoning, if you'll pardon my saying so," Vail argued. "The last persons on earth to know plotters against the Lestrada Government in Saragonda are Lestrada's Minister to Washington and his friends, such as Mr. Barrone and myself."

Willoughby frowned.

"Yes; that's true," he assented, and suddenly

brightened. "But would a plotter against Lestrada make herself known? Wouldn't she masquerade as a friend, for the present?"

"You make my head spin!" Vail complained laughingly. "But you're right, of course. Nevertheless, the stubborn fact remains that I know of no strange Saragondan in Washington. Why don't you consult Mr. Barrone or Dr. Bonilla?"

"I have."

"With no results?"

Willoughby's confiding manner matched Vail's.

"None," he admitted. "Bonilla laughs at the idea of a plot. There are two visitors newly arrived at the Legation, it's true; but they're Parisians, friends of the Minister when he was stationed in Paris."

"Yes," Vail volunteered; "I've had the pleasure of meeting Miss Domenza." He got to his feet and glanced at his watch. "Sorry, but I've an appointment. Sorry also I can't help you, Mr. Willoughby."

The detective kept his seat, looking up at Vail with speculative eyes.

"But you may yet, Mr. Vail," he said, the threat in his tone so hard to distinguish that Vail was not sure of having heard it. "There's that matter of Miss Whiteur's having asked for you. Why should she have done that?"

Vail seemed as much puzzled as his interlocutor.

"I haven't the remotest idea," he answered.

"And, although she asked for Mr. Barrone too,

he also hasn't the remotest idea why. Neither of you knows her?"

"No."

When emphasizing a point, Willoughby had a habit of holding a pencil or a cigarette—any object of that kind—between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand and wagging it at the person he addressed. He did it with his pencil now, resting his elbow on the table.

"Then here's the poser," he said: "she knew who Barrone was, knew that he was a Saragondan. She knew, too, that you lived in this house. In view of those facts, it doesn't seem reasonable to suppose that one of you didn't know her or somebody connected with her in some way. Now does it?"

"I suppose not," Vail admitted. "But the cold fact remains that I know neither her name nor her face, photographs of which I saw in the morning papers."

Willoughby stood up abruptly and pocketed the pencil.

"And you've no explanation for any woman, totally unknown to both of you, calling you up, saying she was a Saragondan and wanting financial assistance?"

Vail was patience itself.

"None whatever, unless possibly she belonged to the Army of Touch, which is always large and ingenious in Washington."

"Yes, of course," Willoughby returned; "it was a

touch. But why single out you and Mr. Barrone? That's what——"

He broke off and, stooping, picked up his hat, gloves and stick.

"Anyway, Mr. Vail," he said, "you've been very accommodating! Later, perhaps, if you hear of anything important, you'll remember me, won't you?"

"By all means!" Vail put more warmth into that than he felt.

They went toward the door into the hall.

"If the unexpected should happen," Willoughby suggested, as though imparting a friendly tip, "and you should recall the name of anybody from Saragonda recently come to town, it would be the kind thing for you to let her know that, in the present circumstances, frankness is her one best bet."

Vail stood still and gave the detective the benefit of a cool scrutiny.

"Meaning—?" he asked.

Willoughby was prompt with a disclaimer.

"Nothing beyond what I said, really."

"Good!" Vail commented in a voice devoid of expression. "I don't like to be kidded; not even by a detective."

Willoughby let that pass unremarked.

"Another thing," he said, now in the hall: "Mr. Barrone would be wise to adopt a more communicative attitude. This investigation's just started, and there

are always possibilities of embarrassment for those refusing to coöperate with the authorities. So many puzzling things come up."

"Yes?"

"Yes," the detective echoed blandly. "There is another man, for instance. One Felton Wilmeth of San Francisco. He checked out of room three-twenty-five last midnight, and was, we think, right there, next door to the murder scene, from ten o'clock to midnight. When we find him, he may tell us a lot."

Vail appeared mildly curious.

"You want me to tell Mr. Barrone that also?" he inquired.

Willoughby smiled.

"Oh, no," he said carelessly. "It's merely interesting. Like the name Domenza. That's interesting too. It has such a Latin American ring, to come from Paris. Things like that interfere with clear thinking in a case of this sort. But I'm detaining you! See you again, I'm sure. Good day."

"Good morning." Vail returned his bow and swung open the front door for him. "Sorry I'm no good to you."

"So am I; but the game isn't played out yet," Willoughby reminded him, and tripped lightly down the steps into the green and gold splendor of the warm May forenoon.

CHAPTER VI

A WOMAN CHANGES HER MIND

As the door closed, Vail dropped the mask of smiling interest which he had assumed for Willoughby's benefit. He was both angry and alarmed, angry with the detective for blundering into a line of false logic that might easily mean unpleasantness for Margarita Domenza, and alarmed lest she be at once approached and questioned by Willoughby or one of his assistants.

In two strides he was at the office door, asking Barrone to join him in the drawing-room. The Saragondan, observing his agitation, was surprised.

"Is it possible, Carston," he asked, "that you've given anything away to that detective?"

"It was he who did the giving!" Vail replied, and repeated what Willoughby had said about the possible Saragondan plot and the Latin American sound of the name Domenza.

He fell to pacing the floor with long, nervous steps.

"You know, Barrone," he continued, "you're a secretive man; and I don't pretend to follow all your ideas and plans. That's why I'm so up in the air about this thing now. It's why I've got to ask you this: have you even a suspicion of why anybody on our side of the game should have a motive for desir-

ing the death of the Whiteur woman? That is, are you afraid at all that the murder can be linked with any of our faction?"

Barrone stood leaning his shoulder blades against the mantelpiece, calmly studying Vail's troubled countenance.

"It's impossible," he said; "unthinkable."

"And Willoughby's intimation that Miss Domenza might be the unknown woman in black! How in the name of all that's fair do you suppose he hit on the idea of a Saragonda plot?"

Barrone was contemptuous.

"It's in keeping with what the police invariably do," he said dryly; "hit on the most wildly improbable thing imaginable. By to-night this Willoughby, tripped by his own conceit, will be accusing you, or Wilmeth, or the man in the moon, and forgetting the woman in black."

Vail put his hand to his pocket, feeling for his gloves.

"Nevertheless," he retorted, "I'm going to warn Miss Domenza."

Barrone stood erect; the peculiar opaqueness of his eyes grew more marked.

"Just a moment," he said softly. "Warn Miss Domenza of what?"

"Of all that Willoughby said. Of the danger of his demanding an interview with her. He'll do it if he ever stumbles on the fact that she's a Saragondan."

Barrone still spoke with deceptive softness.

"Miss Domenza has already been warned," he said.

"Already warned!"

"Yes. I sent Lemale with a note to her as soon as you had begun your conversation with Willoughby. I informed her that the detective entertained a certain curiosity regarding a woman from Saragonda."

Something in his expression disturbed Vail.

"What else?" he asked, coming to a halt in front of Barrone.

"I notified her that she would be expected to meet the four of us in conference here this evening at ten o'clock."

Vail's voice was suddenly as steady and low as Barrone's.

"Why?" he demanded.

Barrone snapped finger against thumb.

"The reasons are plain," he said easily. "Right now Washington is a hullabaloo of gossip about this murder. Just before coming here this morning, Willoughby gave the reporters what the morning papers did not have, the fact that the woman had telephoned here asking for both you and myself. Our photographs will be in the afternoon papers. The reporters are on their way here now. In the last fifteen minutes three people besides reporters have telephoned to ask me what I know about the damned thing. Moreover, it's just a question when the town will be full of the detective's precious theory about a Sara-

gondan plot. The chances of danger to us are obvious."

"Exactly!" Vail commented through his teeth.

"Then haste on our part is imperative. Sol I've notified Miss Domenza to confer with us. If we can agree on necessary precautions, it's up to us to do it. Her objection to giving me the signal code, for example. If she were arrested, in prison charged with murder, where would we be without that code?"

"But why increase her risk by having her come here to-night? To-night, when both she and ourselves may be under surveillance?"

Barrone demolished that objection with a smile that was close to a sneer.

"My dear Carston," he said, "she's undertaken the job of helping Saragonda. Then, why shouldn't she stay on her job? She's not here for fun!"

"But," Vail retorted indignantly, "there's no necessity for being brutally indifferent to what may become of her!"

Barrone spoke almost lightly. Only the hardening of his jaw showed his feeling.

"I'm not considering her at all," he retorted. "I'm thinking of the work we've got to do. That's all I have a right to think of. It's all you have a right to think of; or she! And if the successful carrying out of the plan endangers her—" he snapped his fingers again, "—it's her lookout."

The blood mounted to Vail's cheeks. He was so angry that he had to fight back the desire to punch Barrone's face.

"All the same," he said doggedly, "I'm going to the Legation now, to warn her."

The Saragondan's face expressed a mild curiosity.

"What about our belief that it would be safer for none of us to be seen with her more than was necessary?"

"I've spoken to her about that," Vail answered curtly, "and she agrees with me. Why should our being seen with her arouse any more suspicion than the four of us men being seen together? I don't see it myself."

Barrone did not argue the point. After all, he reflected, the outcome of their plan depended just now upon Vail's influence on Barfield; it would do no good to arouse his combativeness.

"Perhaps," he conceded, and busied himself lighting a cigarette.

Vail went to the door and stopped.

"You'll handle the reporters," he said. "Tell them you're speaking for me too, won't you? Tell them I've nothing to say, know nothing about the murder or the woman?"

"I'll be glad to," Barrone replied, adding with a smile that prophesied small satisfaction for the reporters: "And I sha'n't compromise you!"

To Barrone, Carlos Lemale had reported: "I gave the note to Miss Domenza in person. After reading it, she asked me to say that she thanked you." As a matter of fact, much more than that had passed between the lady and the secretary.

Reaching the Legation, Lemale had announced that he bore a communication which he was instructed to deliver into Miss Domenza's hands. He was taken up to the large drawing-room on the second floor, where after a brief wait Miss Domenza joined him.

He saw her before she came in. She paused in the doorway to say something to a servant, putting several questions and waiting for the answers. When at last she caught sight of Lemale standing near the street windows at the upper end of the room, his face was a curious study. To a woman of less discernment than herself it must have been evident that he had been strangely affected by her appearance. His mouth was open, the heavy lower lip moist; his eyes were blood-shot; his nostrils dilated to his breathing. He seemed to have been hypnotized by her beauty, though in a way not pleasant to see.

When his eyes met hers, he got himself together with surprising promptness. He was in an instant the polite, almost obsequious, messenger from his employer. He introduced himself: "Carlos Lemale, Mr. Barrone's secretary," and, handing her the sealed envelope, stood back, waiting for her to inspect its contents.

She did so, refolding the letter and restoring it to the envelope without change of countenance, after she had given it considerably more time than Lemale thought necessary.

Receiving the message of thanks to Barrone, he was about to withdraw when it occurred to her that, as a last resort, he might be of use to her in locating the ammunition boat. If so, it would be well to have him go away from her now in a frame of mind which would render him hospitable to that suggestion if she finally found it necessary. She detained him with a gesture.

"You are a Saragondan, Mr. Lemale?" she inquired, looking up to him from the sofa on which she had sat while reading his letter.

"Oh, yes," he said in a husky voice, and clasped his hands behind his back to hide their trembling.

By some trick, the softening of her eyes perhaps, she apparently gave him as a compliment a more intense attention.

"And, of course," she pursued, "you are devoted to her and her welfare, her men and her women?"

He went very pale, his eyes glistening, and bowed awkwardly, like a man put out of countenance by his own daring.

"With her women like yourself," he said, and gulped, "how could I help it?"

She laughed, a sound of mingled rebuke and appreciation. When she spoke, there was in her voice a skillfully personal note, infinitely persuasive. Her eyes,

round and glowing, met his avid stare. All the batteries of her beauty played upon him.

"And," she asked gently, "you would be willing to serve her—Saragonda, I mean—if the opportunity were given you? To help me serve her?"

A tremor went through him from head to foot. He grinned fatuously.

"If you would only show me how!"

She started to speak, and checked, in that moment perceiving what manner of man he was. She had so absorbed him in herself that he stood forth self-revealed. It was as though, in attempting to let her see the flattering thoughts in his mind concerning her, he had thrown open the gates too far, giving her a glimpse of the repulsive things he was thinking.

She broke the spell with an abrupt move and rose.

"But I anticipate," she said frigidly. "There is no opportunity now."

A slight nod of her head, and she had turned from him, leaving him alone in the drawing-room.

He was no fool; he knew what she had done to him, realized that, intending at first for some reason to be kind to him, even to captivate him, she had found herself unable to go on with it. Worst of all for his self-respect, he knew that she had thus changed her mind because she had thought him offensive.

His pallor left him. His face was suffused with blood. Mere strips of the whites of his eyes showed

from beneath his lowered eyelids. He hated her for that abrupt casting him off, and at the same time entertained for her loveliness an ugly passion. He resolved then and there to make her pay for the humiliation she had put upon him.

CHAPTER VII

"ON SAFE GROUND"

Parking his Packard roadster in front of the Legation a few minutes after his conversation with Barrone, Vail was in an unenviable frame of mind. He was depressed by a vague and unexplained impression that this thing in which he had engaged was too big for him. He felt a desire to get out of it. Thinking of the girl he had come to warn gave strength to the impulse. What if he fell in love with her? His concern for her alternated in his mind with disapproval of Barrone's calculating indifference to her fate.

He thought then of Forney's complaint of "jumpy nerves" the previous evening. That, he supposed, explained his own depression and exaggerated Barrone's cold determination to hurry things to a conclusion regardless of the cost; suspense, prolonged and now sharpened by Willoughby's interference, was responsible for their emotional discomfort.

With an exclamation of self-derision, he sprang from the car and strode up the walk to the Legation door.

As before, he waited for Miss Domenza in the room overlooking the garden, and, as before, when she came

in he listened for the servant's receding footsteps and put out his hand to close the door. But this time she stopped him.

"We shouldn't be shut up together here so often," she suggested. "It makes our meetings assume too much importance—to others. Besides, there by the window we shall not be overheard."

She saw at once that he was alarmed. It was in his face, in his voice, in the nervousness of his restless movements as he sat opposite her, his right hand playing with a lapel of his coat.

For his part, he was aware of an enchanting phase of her which he had not before consciously noted: the patrician exquisiteness of her presence, the fineness of her lustrous hair, the elegance of simplicity in her garments, that strange and scarcely perceptible fragrance in which she moved. And, seeing her so, he was all the more determined to do what he could to protect her.

"Did you understand Barrone's note?" he began.

"What there was of it," she replied. "He wrote me that the police were looking for a Saragondan woman recently come to Washington, with a view to connecting her with the Wareham murder. He warned me to keep up the fiction I had already begun of being from Paris."

"He hadn't heard then the worst aspect of it," Vail told her, and related Willoughby's theory that the crime had resulted from a Saragondan plot.

She was more surprised than anxious.

"How on earth did he think of that?" she asked.

"A wild guess, we hope. As Barrone says, detectives always start out by assuming the thing that is most improbable. But about yourself. That's what worries me just now. Where were you last night?"

"At the theater with my mother," she replied, and was not so serious that she forgot to give the "mother" the accent that had so puzzled the four men Sunday evening.

He spoke rapidly, questioning her in frank concern.

"Can you prove it?"

"Yes. Fortunately, I have the seat coupons."

"You went with your mother, and returned here with her?"

"Yes."

"What time did you get back?"

She thought a moment.

"It was half-past eleven, I believe. You see, we went to the opera, and the performance wasn't over until ten or fifteen minutes past eleven."

"Anybody see you come into the Legation?"

"Yes; the doorman. And Dr. and Madame Bonilla hadn't yet retired. We chatted with them for a few minutes."

"Thank God for that!" he exclaimed, and flung back in his chair, frowning, his mind already busy with another thought.

"You told us Sunday night, Miss Domenza," he be-

gan again, "that Dr. Bonilla had agreed to say you were a Parisian. You said you had warned him that such a course might avoid difficulties in the future. How did you make your request seem reasonable? Forgive my curiosity, but in view of this murder and the police looking for a Saragondan woman, it seems extraordinary foresight."

"You exaggerate my gift for strategy," she said lightly. "I had no other idea than to be as prudent as possible while doing this work. And the Minister agreed to my request when I gave him to understand that I would, while here, undertake a secret bit of work for President Lestrada, work which I would describe to him the moment it was accomplished."

He was silent, looking past her through the window, thinking of her adroitness, her unlimited resourcefulness. The street sounds from beyond the garden wall came to them, the swish-swish of automobile tires on the hot asphalt, children's laughter, the screech of motor sirens.

He leaned forward and struck his knee with his fist.

"I feel to-day, as I did yesterday," he ended the brief pause, "the difficulty of saying what I wish to say without seeming maudlin! Or presuming. But it all goes back to what I said then: I know you! When that long look passed between us Sunday evening, I knew you, felt as if I might have known you for a lifetime!"

She was leaning back in her chair, looking at him

from under half-lowered eyelids. There was a wariness in her manner, a sustained watchfulness.

"And that being so," he continued, "I know that you are not like other women who mix up in these international plots. Secret service they call it. Most of it is, for them, the leading on of men, no matter how basely the thing is done. They succeed, these other women, when the men, in the drunkenness or infatuation of the moment, give up their secrets!"

He made a grimace of disgust, and thrust his chair closer to her.

"Those women employ such vile devices, engineer such vile temptations! But you—I have no explanation in words; it is a thing of the spirit; but I knew, there in the Q Street house Sunday night, that you were altogether white and fine. Do I seem maudlin after all? Childish? I am sorry. But I had to tell you! In a game of this sort there are always men who expect unworthy things of the women engaged in it. There are, of course, some who are good, clean fellows out for the thrill of the play and the high stakes; but much oftener they are crooks, altogether crooked, low and crawling things respecting neither God nor man nor woman! And I hate, I hate with all my heart, the idea of your unconsciously putting yourself in a position where you may encounter the least disagreeable thing!"

Her smile was a little sad. She had thought of her few minutes with Lemale.

"Yes," she said in a low voice; "at times one has to do the disagreeable for the sake of ultimate victory."

"And once more," he concluded, eager and distressed, "I ask you to let Barrone finish your work here! I tell you that, if I could persuade you to this, there is no price I wouldn't gladly pay, no reckoning I wouldn't gladly make!"

She had straightened in her chair, profoundly moved by the feeling and the unmistakable meaning in his words.

"My friend," she said with a bantering smile, "a woman less sensible than I might think you were making love to her."

He started, his face changing so swiftly that it might have been contorted by pain. His eyes questioned hers, which were full of laughter.

"Making love to you?" he asked vaguely.

She nodded.

He looked away from her, his hand fumbling his coat lapel again.

"No," he said at last, gravely; "you didn't think that. I—the fact is that I have no right to make love to you, or to any woman. I speak as I do, because I admire you and like you so."

She grasped the opening at once.

"Ah? Is it so? Then we are both on safe ground."

He too laughed then, but the slightest bit off-key.

"As if you could ever be anywhere else! But if

you could only see the danger here!" he persisted, unconscious of the apparent contradiction. "The police suspect a plot such as ours. Something gave them that idea. What? They are looking for a Saragondan woman just arrived here. They will eventually find that the description fits you. Don't you realize the pressing danger?"

Her slow smile derided the idea.

"To myself?"

"Yes. And to our work!"

"How?"

He thought of several answers to that, but contented himself with saying:

"Even a detective, by asking question after question, by wearing you down under examination, might trip you into giving him a lead."

She laughingly rebuked him.

"At last, Mr. Vail, you have done the impossible: you have underrated my intelligence!"

He was in despair, seeing that his appeals got no serious response from her. He pushed back his chair and sprang to his feet, subconsciously thinking to give his speech more power by standing over her.

"Leave town with your mother," he begged. "You will be then merely a Parisian who has gone off the scene with no interest in affairs here. Believe me, I can save you now, can reconcile it with my conscience to give you this advice now. It is not disloyalty to

Barrone, or Forney, or von Palz. Your absence would not hamper them. Give me the signal code, and let me take the message to the ammunition boat when I find it. Take my advice before it's too late!"

She rose and stood before him, unquestionably determined.

"No," she answered him, shaking her head. "It is impossible. You are kind, but I've told you how I feel about it. I'm not afraid. And General Santos has given me certain things to do."

At last he surrendered. He stepped back and made her a bow, his hand on his heart, his pantomime of submission to her will a poor concealment of poignant regret.

"Then," he declared, "I fight on at your side—to the happy end!"

"Yes," she said. "I know that, but——"

She left the sentence unfinished, and they moved to the window and looked out at the flowers flaming under the midday sun.

"The conference Mr. Barrone has called for this evening," she inquired; "do you know what it's for?"

"Frankly, I think I do," he said. "It's Barrone's intention to insist on your giving him the signal code."

"I shall not do it!" she said firmly. "The man doesn't seem to be able to get it into his head that I have no intention of disobeying General Santos' instructions. Nor does he think, apparently, that he is

in duty bound to give me the whereabouts of the ammunition boat. And yet, I must have it. It is essential."

"If I were you," he told her, "I wouldn't attend the conference."

"Why not? Your house is only three blocks from here. I can easily slip around there unobserved, just as I did Sunday night."

"But what good will it do? Barrone won't get what he wants from you."

Her chin lifted.

"That's just it," she declared. "It is high time for Mr. Barrone to understand that he won't. In the end he'll have to coöperate with me. He too can't afford to disobey General Santos' orders."

The talk went then to less important subjects, and he remembered his plan to play golf with her. She would be delighted, she said, to go to the Chevy Chase Country Club, but demurred at golf; tennis was her favorite game. This suited him just as well; he rather fancied his ground game.

"Then I'll call for you at half-past two," he proposed as he was leaving.

"That will suit admirably," she assented. "And now, are you in a hurry?"

He made the negation a compliment.

"I want you to meet my mother," she said, "if you'll wait just a moment."

She was gone hardly a minute, returning with a fine-

looking, silver-haired old lady whose tall, slender figure moved with striking dignity. When Vail bowed, with a murmured word acknowledging the introduction, she did not speak.

"My mother," Miss Domenza explained, again with the "mother" enigmatically accented, "is deaf and dumb."

When he left the Legation, he was uncertain whether the handsome old lady was a mother or an employee.

"Anyway," he consoled himself grimly, "it will give the cocksure Mr. Willoughby something to think about!"

CHAPTER VIII

ABSENCE UNEXPLAINED

Mr. Frederic Randolph Peckham, a chubby young man with a large allowance from a proud mother and a small mustache at the hands of a niggardly fate, had just consumed his third pre-luncheon cocktail. He was, therefore, in voluble mood when Mr. Eugene Willoughby, lately come from his talk with Vail, found him comfortably ensconced in a large chair at the H Street window of his exclusive club. Mr. Peckham, entertaining ambitions for a career in the consular service, had prepared for it by cultivating what he conceived to be an Oxford accent and British mannerisms. He wore a monocle on a wide black ribbon and adorned his conversation copiously with long-drawn "Ah-h-h!'s" and "Oh-h-h!'s."

The detective made known his desire for information concerning the poker game in von Palz's rooms.

"Ah-h-h?" Peckham responded mildly.

"Yes," Willoughby said crisply. "You were in that game last night, weren't you? You and another of Mr. Forney's friends, Mr. Hunt?"

Mr. Peckham confessed.

"Oh-h-h! Why, yes."

Willoughby took out his pencil and gesticulated with

it for emphasis. He understood, he said, Mr. Peckham's embarrassing position; a young man about to enter the diplomatic service could not afford to be mixed up with men who at any moment might be the objects of newspaper notoriety. His name had not yet been connected with the Whiteur murder, and, if thoroughly frank in his responses to questions, he might feel assured of protection from such a catastrophe.

The young man's right hand went to his mouth, his fingers nibbling at the phantom mustache. He nodded wisely.

"Ah-h-h! You're right, you know! Thanks," he said solemnly. "What d'you want to know?"

"About the movements of the players during the game. Anybody leave the room? Vail or Barrone leave it?"

"Ah-h-h! Yes; Vail did."

"Anybody else?"

"Er—ah— Yes. Barrone did too."

"Anybody else?"

"No. Nobody else."

"Well, about Vail and Barrone. When did they go out?"

Mr. Peckham toyed with his monocle while reflecting.

"They went out together," he remembered. "Ah-h; yes. It's quite plain now. About twenty or twenty-five minutes past ten. They got up from the card table the same moment, don't you know. And went

into the next room in the Count's suite, you know. Ah-h-h! Yes. I heard their voices in there for a few minutes."

"How many minutes?"

"Ah-h-h? How many? A few. Two or three, possibly. Then they left that room by the door opening on the corridor. I heard it slam. They were gone from the suite half an hour or so. Vail came back first; at about ten minutes to eleven, I should suppose. It was almost eleven when Barrone got back; three or four minutes before eleven."

Willoughby was hanging over the arm of his chair, getting as close as he could to his man, the pupils of his eyes like pin-points. His questioning was rapid-fire.

"Now," he prompted, "what else? Did they say anything to explain their absence?"

"Ah-h? Say anything?" Peckham echoed. "No-o. That's right, you know. Nothing. Nobody asked them."

Willoughby wagged the pencil at him.

"Here's a point I want to settle, Mr. Peckham," he said, "a vital point. Did they go out bareheaded?"

"Bareheaded? Oh-h-h! I see. Let me see. Yes; Vail was bareheaded. Barrone put on his hat; had it on when he came back; a light gray hat with a black band. Both of them had dinner coats on, like the rest of us, you know." The future diplomat jumped in his chair like a man stung. "Oh-h! I say!" he

exclaimed his surprise. "You don't mean to say, you know, that those fellows had anything to do with the murder!"

The detective ministered to his uneasiness.

"Not at all," he disclaimed the possibility. "But the movements of all the men mentioned in connection with the case, however remotely, have to be satisfactorily explained. In helping me to do that, you are also helping to show the absurdity of anybody's harboring suspicions against them."

"Ah-h? Yes. Pleashah, I'm sure."

Willoughby shot another question at him.

"Any telephoning done from the Count's suite last night while you were there, Mr. Peckham?"

"Oh, telephoning? No. Yes! Barrone. That is, you know, he got a call; about half-past nine."

"Remember what he said?"

Mr. Peckham looked affronted. His accent became exceedingly British.

"My deah fellah! Remembah? Why, I nevah even listened!"

Willoughby's face and voice expressed his respect for the gentleman's delicate sense of the proprieties.

"Just what I should have expected from you," he said with a flattering smile. "Unfortunately, not all men are so irreproachably fair as yourself. I had to ask. And that was all the telephoning?"

"Oh-h! All? Yes. All. I was there from the beginning of the game until the news of the murder

got to us, a few minutes after Barrone had been sent for. We broke up then."

"Either Vail or Barrone show any excitement when they came back shortly before eleven?"

Peckham laughed at that.

"Haw-haw! Barrone show excitement? That man's got icicles for veins. Never saw him when he wasn't calm as calm. And Vail didn't either. He was a little more quiet, perhaps; but he'd been that way all the evening."

That exhausted Mr. Peckham's information. Willoughby, subjecting him to a barrage of interrogation that covered many theories and went over what he had already said, could get nothing further of real value. He left the embryo Ambassador complaining bitterly of a state of affairs which compelled a gentleman to deal with bootleggers "here in the nation's capital, don't you know, where a lot of drinking people expect to be properly entertained."

At three o'clock that afternoon the detective, devoting his attention to employees of the Wareham, found food for thought in the story of Lily Steene, a night maid on the third floor of the hotel.

It was this: at twenty-seven minutes past ten last night she was on her way to straighten up room Number 323, recently vacated. On turning out the short into the long corridor on which Number 323 was located, she saw a man with his hand on the knob of room

Number 327, Miss Whiteur's room. The man was "tall and foreign looking, dark complected; and he had his hat pulled down over his eyes. His hat was gray and had a black band on it, and he had on evening clothes, a Tuxedo coat."

When he saw her, which he did the moment she turned the corner, he came on up the corridor toward her, apparently intending to take the elevator. He passed her, and she went into Number 323 to do her work.

Questioned by Willoughby, she would not swear, she said, that the man had his hand "right on the door knob of Number 327," but she believed he did. Anyway, if he did not, his hand was so close to the knob that he was just about to take hold of it or had just dropped it. She believed she would recognize him if she saw him again. She had not seen him after passing him in the corridor.

She was not the maid who went into the murder room soon after the tragedy had been discovered; at that time she was in a room at the extreme end of the long corridor, "nine rooms away from there. The maid who went in where the corpse was, was Maria Amiss."

Maria's story was of small importance. She had seen nobody near the door of Number 327 prior to the murder, nor had she noticed a man in the vicinity meeting the description of the one Lily Steene had

seen. In fact, she did not belong on the third floor, but had slipped down the stairway near the elevator from the fourth to steal a few minutes' talk with Lily. She had been on the third "maybe half a minute" when looking through the open door of Number 327 in search of Lily, she stumbled upon the tragedy.

At five o'clock that afternoon a taxicab containing the detective and Lily Steene drove up in front of the Spectators Club on Fifteenth Street between I and K Streets. If Mr. Alberto Barrone followed his usual daily schedule, he also would soon appear in front of the Spectators, on his way to an hour or two of bridge before dinner. His custom was to park his car around the corner on K Street and walk down the half-block to the club door.

Directed by Willoughby, the chauffeur stationed his taxi a few feet south of the white line marking the space to be kept free in front of the club for arriving and departing cars. The detective got out and, swinging his walking stick, strolled down toward I Street, taking care, however, to be always within a short distance of Miss Steene.

She remained seated in the cab. Thus screened, she would have an excellent opportunity to study both the figure and the face of Barrone as he turned the K Street corner and came down Fifteenth toward the club.

She did not have long to wait. At four minutes

past five, when Willoughby had almost completed his return trip to the cab, Barrone turned the corner.

The detective, stepping forward to get a view of the waiting woman's face through the cab window, was in time to see her head thrust forward with a jerk. He saw that she had recognized the man. She wore a satisfied expression, like that of a person making a hoped-for discovery.

Willoughby went closer to the cab and stood with his hand on the door, apparently about to open it. Then, meeting Barrone's glance for the first time, he halted, his face all surprise, and hailed him.

"How do you do, Mr. Barrone!" he called out effusively. "Any news?"

The Saragondan, continuing his slow, leisurely stride, looked at him as if he might have been a part of the cab, and without a word turned into the club.

Willoughby, telling the chauffeur to drive on, got into the taxi.

"All right, Miss Steene," he said as they swung around from Fifteenth into K Street. "What about it?"

"He's the man, I think, sir," she answered without hesitation. "He's got the same figure the other man had. And he looks like him. He's got the same color, dark complected; and the same set of shoulder."

His eyes held hers.

"What if you have to swear to it?" he asked, smiling encouragement.

"All I can do," she said, "is to say I'm sure he's the man I saw with his hand on the knob. I was certain of it when he turned the corner just now."

He thought: "Her strongest impression of the man last night was when, at first glimpse of him, she saw him taking his hand from the knob. Her strongest impression of Barrone was also her first glimpse of him as he turned the corner; and in that first glimpse she recognized him. I saw it in her face. That tells the story!"

To her he said: "Well, that's a lot, Miss Steene. You've been a big help to me. Tremendous. By the way, if I asked you to tell him to his face that you saw him at the door of room Number three-twenty-seven last night, would you be willing to do it? Willing to tell him?"

Her reply was emphatic.

"I certainly would, sir! And I'd like to see how he'd deny it!"

"Good!" he commended her. "Very good! You've given me something to start on."

CHAPTER IX

ABOUT TWO TRAVELERS

Margarita Domenza had had a delightful afternoon at the Chevy Chase Club, having particularly enjoyed the moment when, serving the first ball of their play, she had made it so sizzling hot that it turned the racket in Vail's hand. During the game and afterward, when they sat on the club veranda with cool drinks on the small table before them, she had given him still another definition of herself. She was all gayety and high spirits, the love of life personified.

"To have a good time, to hurt nobody and to be hurt by nobody, and to laugh while one works!" she exclaimed. "That is the ideal life!"

He found that she had saturated herself with the Freudian psychology—the real, not the burlesque of it which is chattered in the studios and drawing-rooms—and that it had led her to judge people with extraordinary charity.

"Every man," she explained, "is so made up of the influences of others, so molded by the play of circumstances upon him! Who am I, or who are you, to say that we would not have done the same under the same conditions?"

She broke off with a laugh that narrowly escaped bitterness, and added:

"A consoling philosophy, kind sir! The only thing that permits me to bear with myself at times!"

But that was the only jarring note of the afternoon. There was a moment when she seemed to him to delight in things with an abnormal zest. He got the impression that, under her pleasure, was a note of defiance. But the idea came from nothing she said or did: it was shadowy and intangible. A moment later he had dismissed it as unreal, refusing to mar the perfection of these hours with her by trying to analyze a mood which she in all probability did not feel.

It was six o'clock when they got out of the car and stood chatting a moment in front of the Legation.

"I shall probably be at your house this evening a little ahead of the hour set by Mr. Barrone, if you don't mind," she told him. "I may have to ask a favor of you, one more of many."

"That means before ten!" he said with enthusiasm. "Wonderful! Every extra minute will be a wonder added to the night! And you won't let me call for you here?"

She laughed gayly.

"A full-fledged conspirator submitting to male escort through the streets at night? It isn't in the picture!"

As she entered the house, the doorman gave her two telegrams for which he had signed during her absence. She took them from their envelopes and read

them, both in code and both brief. The first, signed "Z," said when decoded:

FORTY-SEVEN B S W.

The second, also signed "Z," read:

MENES BULARIA THURSDAY.

She stepped into the electric elevator and went up to the library, a cozy, book-lined room fragrant with the smell of old leather bindings and good cigar smoke, the place where the Bonillas were usually to be found when free from their respective duties and social engagements. She had had time only to greet them when Mr. Eugene Willoughby's card was brought up to her. It bore the penciled line: "From detective headquarters."

"Tell him, please," she instructed the servant, "that I shall be down in a moment. "Where is he?"

"In the large drawing-room, ma'am."

She excused herself to the Bonillas with a *moue* of vexation.

"As I warned you, Madame," she said regretfully, "I am a most unsatisfactory person in the house. This business of which I spoke so lightly takes, so far, entirely too much of my time!"

The detective stood in the middle of the drawing-room, his straw hat under his left arm, gloves and stick in his left hand.

Her confrontation of him was perfect, her manner distant. Her eyes were clear of all expression, her features set to a pattern of nothingness of both thought

and feeling. Looking at her, he beheld a woman who troubled neither to assume hauteur nor to pretend indifference, one who knew that by no conceivable circumstance could the man before her come within the orbit of her life.

She advanced two steps into the room and, standing, glanced down at the card in her right hand, then at him, and waited for him to speak.

Mr. Willoughby, in spite of his ample self-assurance, was momentarily discomfited. He had the fleeting and slightly troublesome feeling that nothing in his experience had schooled him to deal with a personality such as this.

"Ahem!" he began inauspiciously. "Er—as you see from my card, Miss Domenza, I am a detective; and, I'm sorry to say, I find it necessary to ask you a few questions—if you will permit me?"

Still her face told him nothing. Her lips scarcely moved to frame the one word:

"Yes?"

"Yes. But, perhaps, you would be more comfortable seated?"

A move of her hand, if indeed it did move, indicated that the suggestion was of no importance.

Mr. Willoughby cleared his throat.

"Well, the fact is," he plunged into his explanation, "that you, being a new arrival in Washington and a guest at the Saragondan Legation, are of special interest to the police just now. In connection with the

Whiteur case. So I have to ask you: are you a native Saragondan?"

Her eyes were at last expressive, like those of a woman catching sight of an unusual but hardly interesting thing.

"I cannot see what significance that could have for you," she answered, her voice low and clear.

He deposited hat and stick on the nearest chair.

"You will see very soon, Miss Domenza," he retorted, his right hand pulling at the fingers of the gloves he held in his left. "As soon as I was put on this case—last midnight, to be exact—I sent certain cablegrams to Olua, which is, as you know, the port city of Saragonda. I have just received answers to them, disclosing these facts: on the tenth of this month a young woman sailed from Olua for the United States. On the eleventh another young woman sailed from Olua for the United States. One went by way of Havana, the other by way of New Orleans. Was either of them you?"

Miss Domenza sank slowly into a chair near the door. Studying her face, the detective was unable to tell whether it proclaimed an incipient boredom or a faint amusement.

"Again," she said, "I can't imagine why the police should be interested in my answer."

"No matter what your answer might be?"

"No matter what," she declared.

He extended his right hand, holding the gloves

folded lengthwise, and wagged them at her as he had done with the pencil with young Peckham.

"But please consider these facts," he began: "we are unable——"

Her voice, low but with an overtone of distaste, interrupted him:

"If your mental processes are not absolutely dependent upon pointing things at me, do you mind not doing it?"

The offending hand dropped to his side; he flushed.

"Er—beg pardon. Really." He continued his explanation, striving to appear at ease: "These facts, if you please, Miss Domenza: the police can't identify this unfortunate woman who registered as Miss Whiteur. Nothing in her baggage identifies her. No marks on her clothing. No papers. There has been no response to her published photograph, taken after death. Nobody has come forward to say he recognized her. But she told Lemale she was a Saragondan. Evidently, then, there is the chance that any other woman from Saragonda may have known her or known of her. I have to ask you: did you know her?"

Her countenance still bothered him, with its unchanging and puzzling suggestion of something on the thin line between threatened boredom and a trifling amusement.

"You mean, I suppose: did I kill her?"

He looked at her suspiciously, fearing that he was being laughed at.

"Well," he retorted, not without roughness, "I was coming to that, maybe. But did you know her?"

"Miss Whiteur? No."

Her particularity exasperated him.

"Did you ever know this woman whose photograph is published in to-day's papers?" he demanded. "That's what I want to know."

"I didn't look at the photograph," she replied.

In spite of his determination to maintain a show of self-control, his voice went a note or two higher.

"Your astonishing lack of interest in this case, Miss Domenza," he informed her, "will no doubt disappear when you understand that we should very much like to know where you spent last night!"

She was silent the space of three seconds before she commented on that.

"To be shouted at," she said then, her distant manner unimpaired, "is quite as offensive to me as to be pointed at."

A moisture appeared on his forehead.

"Oh—er—excuse me!" He almost blurted the words.

"Certainly."

Her graciousness was of a quality that increased his unhappiness.

"But facts are facts, Miss Domenza. Where were you last night?"

Again she let the silence last a few seconds.

"As before," she answered, "I can't imagine any-

body's being interested in the fact. However, I was here in the Legation."

"I mean between eight and midnight!"

"You mean the evening? I spent the evening at the opera with my mother."

Involuntarily he went a step toward her. He had for the first time a statement of hers to work on.

"And of course," he pursued, "you could prove it beyond all question?"

Though the steady, discomfiting look was in her eyes, the hint of a smile, a shadow of contempt, touched the corners of her lips.

"I can," she answered.

"How?"

She rose, the move a picture of leisureliness, and with slow, undulating step left the room and went down the hall.

When she returned a minute or two later, he was standing as she had left him. She did not look at him until she had reseated herself. Resting her left elbow on the arm of the chair, she held out her hand, disclosing on the open palm two pieces of thin, dark-red pasteboard. They were theater seat coupons.

Mr. Willoughby stood gazing at them. The distance was too great for him to read what was printed on them, but he did not move closer. Miss Domenza, realizing the feeling that made him keep his distance, raised her eyes and flicked him with her glance.

He was certain then that she was ridiculing him.

With a half-formed word in his throat he stepped forward and took the coupons from her hand.

He inspected them carefully.

"And now, if you will return them to me," she suggested coolly, "there will certainly be nothing else you care to ask me."

He put them back on her open hand which she had not withdrawn.

"Box M," he repeated the numbering he had read. "Very near the exit on the alley leading from the theater to La Fayette Park, two short blocks from the Wareham, the scene of the murder. You were in the theater throughout the performance?"

She was silent, her face no longer a puzzle. It proclaimed a decided and contemptuous amusement.

He raised the hand that held his gloves, but remembered in time not to point with them. He scowled and attempted to domineer.

"I mean," he said angrily, "you didn't leave the theater and return to it before the performance was over?"

She rose and with a step reached the doorway.

He spoke from behind her.

"Then, Miss Domenza," he challenged, "you refuse to answer my questions? Refuse to say whether you can help the police in their dilemma over this woman's identity? You refuse to say whether you know who she was?"

She turned slowly, her glance beyond him. Her

voice, low and contained, was like the swish of a lash.

"Two women sailed from Olua for this country two weeks ago. Therefore, I am one of them! I went to the theater last evening with my mother. Therefore, I am presumably the mysterious woman in black who haunted the Wareham all last evening. And you talk to me of refusing to help the police! I don't know what I marvel at most: your insolence in subjecting me to this farce, or my patience in submitting to it so long!"

Mr. Willoughby went to the door and watched her go, again with slow, undulating step, down the long hall and through a door on her right. He started for the stairway, but, remembering the hat and stick he had left on the chair, went back for them. Then, a careful look around assuring him that he was unobserved, he lingered long enough to mop his glistening forehead and to glance at himself in a convenient mirror. He shook himself more comfortably into his coat. He felt as if his clothing had been disarranged.

CHAPTER X

THE MENACE OF PAUL MENES

At a quarter past eight Miss Domenza left the Legation and walked rapidly one block east to the taxicab stand in front of the Burleigh hotel. She was in street costume and wore a black, wide-brimmed sailor hat with a black veil concealing her face from forehead to chin. Taking a cab, she directed the chauffeur:

"To the main door of the House of Representatives Office Building. And hurry, won't you, please?"

Alighting in front of the Office Building, she told the driver to await her return.

She did not, however, go up the white marble steps leading to the offices of statesmen. She turned down the steep hill of B Street, Southwest, which parallels the Capitol grounds, and walked a block and a half to the five-story red-brick building numbered 47. In the vestibule of this house, which had been turned into flats, she found under one of a row of speaking tubes the name, "G. Carias." Pushing the bell button under the name, she heard the click of the entrance door and saw it swing a few inches ajar. She went in and ascended to the third floor.

In the open doorway of the rear flat on that story she saw a neatly dressed, black-haired man of average height who seemed shorter because of his stooped shoulders. She went straight to him and inquired in English:

"Mr. Gregoric Carias?"

"Yes, miss," he replied, making no move to invite her in.

"Are you alone?"

He frowned, his black eyes staring suspiciously at her veiled face, and pointed with jerked thumb toward the interior of the flat.

He spoke with a Spanish accent.

"My wife and kid's there," he explained.

She took him by the wrist and, drawing him into the hall so suddenly that he did not have time to resist, leaned close to him, whispering five words in Spanish.

He started back from her, shaking off her hold on his wrist, and put up a warning hand.

"Sh-h-h!" he said, trembling and deadly pale.

Although she knew that he was a native Saragondan, she continued the talk with him in English.

"Come with me a moment," she commanded, and turned to the head of the stairs.

"Yes, miss," he submitted humbly, shutting the door of the flat without explanation to his family.

She led the way down the two flights of stairs and across the street into the Capitol grounds, he walking

bareheaded a little distance behind her. Keeping away from the paved walks and the arc lights, she went twenty yards up the hill in the dew-drenched grass until she stood under a large oak, where it was darkest.

"Come closer, Gregoric," she directed him. "Here beside me."

Although she spoke as one having absolute power over him, her manner expressed a kindness and a sense of dependence upon his efforts which bound him to her.

"This is what has to be done," she began; "what you have to do."

She talked for three or four minutes in a whisper, her head so close to his that at times the edge of her hat touched his ear.

"Now," she concluded, "do you understand clearly, every detail?"

"Yes, miss," he answered. He started to plead: "You wouldn't run me in no needless danger, miss, would you? There's my wife and kid. They——"

She stopped him with a hand on his arm and repeated the five words she had whispered to him at the door of his flat. He instinctively put up his free arm as though to ward off a blow.

"I know I got to do it!" he said hastily.

"Exactly," she commented coldly, but relented and consoled him: "There will be no danger. I'll see to that. At two, then, be ready."

At half-past nine Vail opened the door, admitting Miss Domenza to the Q Street house. In the drawing-room he lifted the long black cape from her shoulders, revealing her superb in a lemon-colored evening frock, a narrow, jeweled bandeau gleaming in her hair.

"We have the house to ourselves," he explained. "The others haven't come in, and, as usual on such occasions as this, Lemale and the servants have the evening off."

"It suggests coziness, confidences, doesn't it?" she said, the soft, warm notes of her voice adding to the illusion in her words.

His smile was boyishly happy.

"You feel it too?"

"Yes: and I proceed to confide."

They sat down facing each other, like two people about to discuss a business proposition.

"Rather, to beg," she amended. "May I?"

He swept a half-circle with his right arm.

"The whole world!"

"It is this," she said gravely: "A man named Paul Menes will arrive in New York harbor Thursday aboard the *Bularia*. If he lands, it will mean serious danger to our plans if not actual and prompt catastrophe. I want you, if possible, to prevent his landing, or at least to delay it until Mr. Barfield has acted in our behalf."

He was completely taken aback.

"Prevent his landing!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Can't it be done?"

"How?"

"By filing charges against him. Secret charges. Don't you remember the case of that Polish publisher a few months ago? He was detained at Ellis Island for a week. The newspapers announced his detention and explained it that way: 'secret charges'—nothing more."

Her frank eagerness to win his help convinced him of the seriousness of the situation.

"Yes," he said. "I do recall it. And he was finally released, allowed to land, without the charges ever being published. But—" the thin line of perplexity showed between his eyebrows, "—what would be the charge against this Paul Menes?"

She had leaned back, her hands lightly folded in her lap, her head tilted upward to rest comfortably against the chair-back, her slow breathing moving the fold of tulle that edged her gown at her breast. She looked at him from beneath lowered eyelids.

"That he is a Spanish anarchist," she answered.

He caught at that.

"Is he? Really?"

Her slow smile rebuked his unbelief.

"He is worse than that!" she declared, a sudden emphasis in her speech. "And he can destroy all our work! The only man in the world who can!"

He thought how the thing could be arranged: an appeal to Barfield, the State Department's representa-

tions to the Immigration Bureau, the consequent removal of Menes from the boat to Ellis Island.

He drew a long breath.

"I can do it!" he exclaimed resolutely. "I will do it. But how can he hurt us? Who is he, really?"

"That's why I have confided in you," she replied, appeal in her eyes. "Mr. Barrone would ask those same questions, would insist on my answering them. And I hope you won't. Because the General has forbidden my answering them. Ever since I left Saragonda, I have refused to believe that this man could threaten us. Now he is almost upon us; and one of my final instructions was: if Menes tries to land in the States, prevent it. Moreover, I have the facts, documents containing the charge that he is an anarchist. And he is the only weak place in our armor."

He turned that over in his mind, his eyes not meeting hers. He wanted to think clearly, to avoid mistakes.

"I suppose," she added with a sigh, "I am so frightened because it is through me that he would strike."

"Where does Menes come from?" Vail asked. "I mean where from just now?"

"From Havana," she answered, and, with the nearest approach to fear that he had ever seen in her, continued: "Won't you, my friend, take my word for it that, if Paul Menes lands, this work to which I would give my very life will never bear fruit?"

His glances proclaimed his unqualified confidence in her.

"It is impossible for me to doubt you at any time, Miss Domenza," he said. "When can you let me have those documents, the charges against him?"

"At any time. To-morrow morning."

"That will do," he decided. "I can guarantee, I believe, that Menes will be kept away from here for at least five or six days."

She turned, moving in her chair so that her face was hidden from him. He thought he saw her shoulders rise and fall once, like those of a woman fighting back a sob.

But her capacity for surprising him was unmeasured. When she faced him again, it was to spring to her feet with a laugh and a jest at the expense of sentimentalists.

"I want to see this stronghold of all our plottings!" she continued. "This is the drawing-room, of course, and that—" she went to the doorway and looked at the closed door across the hall, "—is the room used as an office, isn't it?"

He fell easily into her new mood.

"Ho, for the cave of wonders!" he said. "I'll show you through it."

Explaining that back of the long drawing-room was a small library where Barrone sometimes worked, he led her across the hall, into the office, thence through a door seldom used to the dining-room back of the

office, and then to the pantry, the kitchen and the back porch with its steps running down to a gate in a high board fence opening on an alley.

She was interested in everything, particularly in the office: Barrone's desk, Vail's, and Lemale's, the filing cabinets, the steel safe, the card-index system.

As she crossed the hall in front of him and re-entered the drawing-room, she rose on her toes and, pirouetting a full circle with arms outstretched, made low obeisance before him, her forehead almost touching the floor. He caught her hand and drew her erect. As she rose, taking a step forward, her face came very near to his, hers flushed and laughing, eyes brilliant. The warmth and fragrance of her enveloped him, took possession of him.

"I love you!" he cried out, looking into her eyes and drawing her, by the hand, closer to him. "You were made for adoration! For mine!"

The flame of his eyes and all the longing in his face and voice showed her in an instant what she meant to him. She felt that in this moment at least he intended her to know.

And with that realization all her gayety fell from her as a garment is cast off. The transformation was so sudden and complete that it startled him. He did not resist when she gently disengaged her hand from his.

She smiled, lips forming an outline of mirth against

the background of sadness and remoteness that was now her true expression.

"And this morning," she said, her voice flat in spite of her simulated levity, "you informed me that you couldn't make love to me!"

"But," he put in eagerly, "if I feel——"

She retreated from him a step and stood leaning against the table.

"No!" she interrupted sharply. "My good friend, Carston Vail, there are no 'if's' in this. There can be none. I tried to warn you this morning, but you would have none of it. Now you must have it."

She spoke hurriedly, like a woman reciting words painfully memorized in advance, her hands behind her twisting a silver paper knife on the table.

"When you said you couldn't love me, it was true. I am not the sort of woman you think me. What do you know about me? Who am I? Where from? Why should you take me on faith and, flinging about me the mantle of your idealism, insist that I am and will always be what you imagine me to be? Henceforward, we work together when necessary, but that is all."

He stared at her as if he thought her out of her mind.

"But this afternoon at the club!" he said helplessly. "And here this evening we have been happy together! You—no woman—could have doubted what I felt for you."

She looked ashamed.

"I stole those hours," she confessed. "I said to myself: 'Surely it will do no great harm to let myself go, to snatch all this pleasure and happiness in a little recess from reality!' But I was wrong."

His eyes flamed again.

"Then it was happiness to you!" he exulted.

She moved her head slowly from side to side once, lips twisted by the bitterness of what she forced them to say.

"It was pleasure, unfair pleasure," she corrected him. "An imposition upon the chivalric friendship of a very unusual man, an unusual friend——"

He went a step closer to her.

"But if I choose to give——" he began eagerly.

"Ah," she interposed, "there are other things to consider! Let me explain. You spoke yesterday morning of your feeling that you knew me, had known me a long time. That was not a sensation peculiar to yourself. I felt that I knew you. People in other circumstances than ours wouldn't understand, perhaps. But I do. Situated as we are, with immense responsibility sharpening our thoughts to a fine edge, with suspense cutting loose the crust of conventionality, with our emotions played upon every hour by accident and necessity, we are obliged to feel deeply. You and I, for instance: our acquaintance must be measured, never by hours, but by the depth of our feeling, by heartbeats. We are indeed old friends.

And—" she lifted one hand to her throat, "it has meant much to me."

"Then you must—" he began to argue again.

"Let me finish, please," she begged, her hand dropping, a dead weight, to her side. "I hope I shall not sound absurd. I have never spoken so to a living soul in all my life. I can speak so only to you, nominally a stranger, because you are so much my friend! I admit, then, that I have seen, here this evening and at the club, what you felt for me. I saw it this morning. Oh, what woman does not see those things in a man's eyes before ever they rise from his heart to his tongue! And this is my confession: I, whom you could never really love, let you think that you could. My vanity, my woman's love of appreciation, so unfairly did that to you!"

He caught her hand and held it.

"Still I don't understand!" he protested. "Why can't I love you if I——"

She drew away from him, taking her hand from his, and tossed her head, a gesture utterly weary.

"It is simple enough, my friend," she returned, looking down at the twisted paper knife in her other hand. "You have been kind to me, and I've imposed upon it. I don't love you. You will never love the real me. It is finally and altogether out of the question. Imposs——"

They heard a man's footsteps on the stone stairs outside coming up to the front door.

"But after our work is done," Vail persisted, "when you and I as man and woman——"

She held her head high.

"Never!" she interrupted imperiously.

A key rattled in the lock of the outer door.

She became, with surprising quickness, matter of fact.

"Business associates, and not

lovers." "Just now nothing more."

"The necessity of keeping P

you think it wisest, tell Mr. so."

Barrone appeared at the door from

"How do you do," he said pleasantly. "You are early, Miss Domenza. Or am I late?"

CHAPTER XI

THE CONFERENCE

Barrow opened the conference with an explanatory statement. On his side of the table at his left sat Forney and Count von Palz. Miss Domenza, on the opposite side, occupied the same chair she had occupied in the first meeting, and to her right and a little back on the same side Mr. Vail was seated.

Barrow was at his best, ingratiating, suave. He compared Vail again to a lava field whose surface may for a moment be broken up by the irresistible pressure of the heat imprisoned beneath it.

"What we wish to lay before you, Miss Domenza," he began, "is the desirability, I may say the necessity, of your giving us the code by which General Santos is to be told that he may safely march on Olua and Quezalango. Mr. Forney and Count von Palz—" he indicated them with a wave of his hand, "—and I have no doubt, Mr. Vail also, agree with me on this point. It is a necessity because, in the event of your absence from the scene when Mr. Barfield finally acts, we men must be in position to forward the message without a moment's delay."

Her glance went from him to Forney and the German, making plain how very greatly this statement had surprised her.

"Why," she inquired, "are you supposing that I shall be absent from the scene?"

Barrone smiled, to mitigate the bluntness of his words.

"You will pardon me," he said, "if I reply frankly. It is not overshooting the mark to say that there is a possibility of your being arrested in connection with the Whiteur case. Mr. Vail has just told me about the necessity of our keeping a Mr. Paul Menes away from Washington in order to insure us against disaster. Willoughby, the deluded detective, has a wild theory about a Saragondan plot. The town is talking about nothing but the Whiteur mystery and, in doing so, it discusses Saragonda and Saragondans as much as it does the crime. Evidently, therefore, the possibilities of—ah—inconvenience to us have greatly increased in the last twenty-four hours, are increasing all the time. In view of this, Mr. Vail has agreed to make another effort to-morrow to hurry Barfield. If he succeeds to-morrow, or the next day, or the next, we must—literally must—be able to flash the signal to General Santos at once."

He paused.

"And?" she prompted.

"And," he came to his conclusion with another conciliatory smile, "if you were not within reach, if you were under arrest, and we were therefore unable to cable the signal, the delay would be incalculably costly."

She pondered that, her gaze on Barrone's hand which, resting on the table, held a lighted cigarette so steadily that the smoke went up from it in a straight, unwavering thread.

It occurred to Vail then that he had never seen Margarita Domenza so radiantly beautiful. The emotional stress of the scene downstairs a few minutes before had left her outwardly untouched. She and Barrone were equally matched.

"I don't see," she said at last to Barrone, "why my arrest is a possibility. I don't see, in fact, why it is as much of a possibility as yours, or Mr. Vail's. Your names have been mentioned in connection with the crime. Mine hasn't."

He tried to keep her to his argument.

"Still," he persisted, his voice silken-soft, "if you were arrested, Miss Domenza?"

She refused to be put on the defensive. Her chin went up, a gesture of determination with which Vail was now familiar.

"Mr. Barrone," she returned, a touch of coolness in her voice, "your instructions from General Santos through me are that you give me the whereabouts of the ammunition ship. I have a message to deliver there. The General's order to me is that, when the time comes for such action, I am to send him, in a certain code, the information that he can begin his military operations. I propose to obey my instructions until I have a better reason for ignoring them

than you advance here. Will you also obey yours?"

Forney bounded in his chair.

"Crepe and condiments!" he exclaimed to Barrone. "If my people in New York thought there was any friction among us, their money would run so quick you couldn't see its coat-tails for the dust!"

Von Palz also was uneasy.

"There is much money concerned here!" he protested, his little eyes dancing behind the heavy lenses of his spectacles. "Much money already spent. Much more to be spent. Is it to be kicked about and endangered by a lot of superfluous suspicions and precautions?"

"There is more than money at stake in this!" she answered with impressive spirit. "The lives of many men and women! The future of Saragonda. The happiness of a whole people! And to protect them, I shall follow my instructions. I care nothing, believe me, nothing, about the money!"

The German winced.

"Gott in Himmel!" he said incredulously, and bit through his cigar.

Barrone's jaw had hardened, his eyes clouded.

"You see, Miss Domenza," he pressed her; "we are agreed on this thing. We ask you, if you desire the success of our plans, to let us have the code message telling the General to move, and the code in which it is written."

Ridicule gleamed briefly in her eyes, as though

the absurdity of this proposal tempted her to laugh.

"I would give you the code," she said, "only if I knew that in the next moment I should be arrested. That is——"

"But if I were not there when that happened?" he put in brusquely. "If none of us were there?"

"That means," she finished her interrupted sentence, disregarding his query, "that I am willing to yield more than you will. I have asked you twice now for the location of the ammunition ship."

Barrone was again all smoothness.

"That boat," he replied, "is being loaded at this moment. Rifles in case after case are going aboard her. Cartridges, explosives. Machine guns. Men are breaking their backs, are being paid double the usual wages, to do the loading swiftly. They are working in the dark, by stealth, sneaking small boats out to the ship, risking detection, arrest and punishment. Nobody save myself knows where they are, where the cargo has been concealed, where the ship rides. The secret has been kept perfectly. It had to be. It still has to be. Now I ask you: would it be wise to increase our risk by telling even you or these gentlemen?"

"I am ordered to take a message to that ship," she answered, unmoved.

He put both elbows on the table and, slowly sliding them forward, rested his chin on his hands so that he looked up at her through his thick eyebrows.

"Will you," he demanded, "in return for the location of the ship, give me the signal code?"

She studied him with eyelids crinkled at the corners, looking for a hidden trap in the question.

"No," she answered firmly. "I haven't the right."

"That," he commented with heavy irony, "is a surprising confession for Miss Domenza to make."

"Nevertheless," she repeated, "I haven't the right."

"But you have the right to put this whole venture in jeopardy, as you are now undoubtedly doing!"

She ignored the sarcasm. Neither lacking in courage nor confused in thought, she made a gallant figure, hands crossed in her lap, her head high, awaiting something from him that deserved reply.

It was admiration, not pity, that moved Vail to go to her help.

"I agree with Miss Domenza, Barrone!" he said sharply, and rose and went to stand beside her. "She hasn't the right to——"

Without turning her head to look at Vail, she raised a hand to the level of her shoulder, a move to stop him. Barrone watched them through his eyebrows.

"Just a moment, Mr. Vail, please," she interrupted gently.

She stood up and swept the three opposite with eyes suddenly hard and commanding. She was free from any sign of excitement. Her speech, more clear-cut than before, suggested neither threat nor anger.

"As a matter of fact," she began, giving Barrone

her attention, "all this has been most unnecessary and altogether unprovoked. If Mr. Barrone had thought it over as he generally thinks things over, to the last detail and without emotion, he would have perceived in advance the futility of trying to force me to outrage my principles and my instructions. The situation, save in so far as Mr. Vail controls it through his connection with Mr. Barfield, is in my hands. I have in a safe place the documents from the General awarding the rubber concessions and making the other pledges of which you know. And I alone have the signal code. As I have already said, if I knew that I was to be put in such a position that I could not send the code message or deliver the documents to you at the proper time, I should give them into your keeping. But—" she took a step backward, still holding their eyes with her own, "—as things are now, I am compelled to do the work given me to do."

She paused, fearless and magnificent, and fell back from them another step.

"That," she concluded, "is as clear as I can make it. It is clear to you also, I hope."

Although there was no question in her voice, Forney answered her.

"Yes ma'am!" he agreed explosively.

Barrone, his face a mask, straightened up and blew out a cloud of cigarette smoke which hung between them like a curtain.

"All the same," he insisted, forcing a smile, "if you

will pardon the repetition, the time may come when you will regret your—ah—refusal to coöperate.”

She neither looked at him nor answered him.

“Then good night,” she said, her voice colorless, and, turning quickly, went through the door and down the stairs.

They were silent until the slight sound she made in closing the front door came up to them. Forney was the first to speak.

“Coming cowslips!” he exclaimed, handkerchief to his forehead. “That voice she used last is still going down my spine!”

CHAPTER XII

MR. FORNEY'S ADVENTURE

But Forney had something of importance to communicate. Springing from his chair to perch on the side of the table, he flung his news upon them while they were yet trying to recover, in their several ways, from the effect of Miss Domenza's ultimatum and departure. With the joviality all gone from his round face, his darting and bulging eyes summoned their attention.

"Blithering bellwethers, but I've had a tough time!" he began on a high key. "Indicates a tough time for the rest of you. Possibly. Ever heard of a Mrs. Lucille Leffington?"

The German's interest was immediately caught.

"Lives at the Wareham?" he inquired.

"Yes," Barrone replied to that; "Billie Hackett's friend. You know; the Congressman from Pennsylvania. And, when he isn't playing around, she's a gold-digger anywhere the chance offers."

"Well!" Vail put in testily. "What about her?"

"She's a detective!" Forney answered. "Consummate crime! See what you think of it. I went down to the Wareham hotel pool this afternoon. Went early, to be ahead of the mob that shows up at four—

Ambassadors' daughters, Senators' wives, millionaires' ex-wives. Not a soul in or about the pool but me. I took a header off the springboard. Came up shaking the water out of my eyes. And there she was! Right out on the tip end of the springboard! Ready to dive. In a bright red one-piece suit. Red rubber cap. And beau-ti-ful! An eyeful!

"She went up off that board like a dart. Like a wand! Like a leaping flame! Came down and cut the water like the blade of a knife. Didn't kick up so much as a drop of water going under. And she popped up within a yard of me. And smiled!

"'How do you do, Mr. Forney!' Came right at me. Just like that, her lips dripping water, words and smiles all together. Then she handed me the old seasoning. Told me her name. Said she didn't believe I remembered her. How ungallant I was not to recall meeting her a month ago at the British Embassy. To me, mind you! Me standing there in water up to my shoulders, pop-eyed and petrified, afraid every minute she'd reverse the Venus stunt and melt back into the pool! And didn't I remember her? Rapture and roses! I could remember meeting my mother-in-law's ghost next Christmas if it looked like that!

"She opened up on me. Cut loose with everything she had, and did it to the queen's taste. I'm honest about it: I believed everything she said. I didn't need a mirror to see myself as the fellow who, above

all others in trousers, rolled up her thrilled young soul in a small bundle and slipped it into his breast pocket. You'd have done the same!

"She had ball-bearing eyes; the kind that move without squeaking and do a full revolution every time. And something about her! Loose and languid lilies! Ever sit in a dewy, shaded spot early on a June morning, and crush a violet into perfume with your foot just as you reached for a mint julep all crowned with mint and aroma, and feel your face cooled by a slow, summer breeze coming right off a clover field in full bloom? Right! Then you know the million-flower-power fragrance that came to me from her standing there with about a yard of water between us. Magic stuff that water couldn't kill!

"Hail and hello! That was just a start. Accidents began to happen. A swift-moving series of minor catastrophes! Me always in the rôle of surprised rescuer, hero and life-saver. She put up her arms, about to make a stroke to swim away, and slipped. Entirely accidental, of course! Her silk-stockinged foot slipped and trod on mine. Her knee slipped and struck mine. I never saw a woman so suddenly and inexplicably lose all muscular control. I was Mr. Magnet, she helpless Miss Steel. I drew her more and more. The accident grew. She slipped worse. Arms flailed the water. And all of a sudden she was breathless, floating on the water, chin hooked over my left shoulder. Her left shoulder in my mouth! You

get it, don't you? Magic propinquity. Contact. Result: romantic ideas!

"Then, when she was on her feet again, she gave me one of those revelation nods—you know; flick of the head—that tossed the ten commandments, and me too, clean over her pearly shoulder. Invitation. Confession. *And* surrender. All at once!

"Snooks and snickersnees! I'm no saint, you know. No graven image all wrapped up in unconquerable aversion to the weaker sex. I fell! Superb, I tell you, she was. And supersatisfied with me! So what more natural, after all this, than the need of hot and moving beverages? And she had 'em! In her room! A cellarette. A cellar! Cocktails. Charm. And chatter. I fell again. Harder! Surrendered to the atmosphere. A haze, warm, seductive and delightful, closed in on me. Conversation was a minor matter—to me. The sound of her voice lulled me. Soothed me. I found myself letting her talk, answering whatever she put forward.

"All good and fair till something hit the base of my brain like a ton of brick. Ever have the sensation? Sudden coming back to alertness and comprehension? Like a thousand fire bells shattered to atoms on your skull! A million dinner gongs gone mad in the cerebellum! And every nerve and fiber and brain cell in me yelling: 'Look out!'

"First thing I knew I was squinting at her out of trembling eyelids, thinking harder than I ever did in

my life. And stared worse! Trying to remember! Trying to think what she'd just said and what I'd just said. No good! Drew a blank every time. All I knew was, she had asked me: 'Well, what is the Saragondan end of the game?'

"Writhing ringworms! 'What game?' I came back at her. 'What you've just told me,' she said, looking as absorbed and fascinated as if I'd told her about the resurrection of the James brothers. 'What did I tell you?' I stalled, heart in my mouth, ears thundering. I guess they were aching for some sort of an answer that would give me a lead on what I'd spilled.

"But nothing doing. She saw the curtain was down. On my performance any way. Getting nothing more out of me, she transformed into the gabby clam. Wouldn't say what I'd said, or how much she'd asked. Turned loose nothing but persiflage and badinage and 'Have another drink!'

"Shuddering saints! I didn't let on how sick I was feeling. Got out pretty soon, staggering under the weight of a dozen rapid-fire invitations to come back. But I knew then, and I know now, I'd missed catastrophe by a whisker. If I *did* miss it!

"She was pumping me about this game of ours. That's what she came to the pool for. I was her meat from the time she materialized on the end of that springboard. She's a detective. A super-lallapaloosa of a detective! And what I want to know is, who's hiring her? Willoughby?

"And if Willoughby isn't, who would? Of course, Washington's full of these wandering women who aren't above using the charms of their sex and their liquor to wheedle a secret out of a fellow and then sell it to somebody on the other side, whether it's international stuff or legislation on the hill. And the cold, hard, double-studded fact remains that this Jane made a dead set at me. To get something about Saragonda out of me. And came darn near getting it!"

Von Palz, who had tilted back, the better to study Forney's face while he talked, dropped the front legs of his chair to the floor with a thump and struck the table with the knuckles of his right hand.

"You mean you were crazy enough to let her get you drunk?" he demanded insolently.

"Wait a minute, Count!" Vail put in quickly. "Forney's naturally uneasy, of course. But it's a practical certainty that he didn't say anything unwise. Those sudden awakenings, those lightning-like signals of danger sent up by the subconscious mind to the conscious mechanism, almost invariably go up in time to save a man. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, he comes to when the first menacing question is asked; not when it's too late to save himself. Forney's alarm is not because of what he actually said. It's what remains in his mind of the alarm he felt at what he was about to say."

Forney's sigh was a sputter of relief.

"I believe you're right, Carston," he said. "I don't really feel that I let anything out."

Barrone got up and thrust his chair back.

"The main thing," he declared savagely, "is the importance of our realizing that we're up against more than we counted on—realizing it and acting on it. Whether the Leffington woman represented Willoughby or her own curiosity, the fact remains that we can't afford one unnecessary risk or delay! I tell you, gentleman, we've got to speed things up! And that means, Vail, we pin our hopes to you."

An hour later, when Vail was undressing for bed, Barrone came into his room.

"Carston," he began in his emotionless, inscrutable way, "your attitude to-night was exclusively one of protecting Miss Domenza, rather than concern for our success. Is that fair?"

Vail, watching Barrone's reflection in the mirror, unbuttoned his collar and laid it on the bureau before answering.

"I observed also," he said then, without turning, apparently as emotionless as the other, "that you refused to obey the instructions she brought from Santos. Is it fair to bully a woman?"

Barrone laughed.

"You certainly can't believe," he protested, "that my asking her for that code is without good reason?"

"You mean you believe that she will be arrested in connection with this Whiteur business?"

Barrone inhaled and blew out a cloud of cigarette smoke. Vail was facing him now.

"I have every right to be uneasy," he replied, "and every right to safeguard our plans. And I have reason to fear that she may be arrested. Just that."

"What reason?"

"Oh, hell!" the Saragondan exclaimed. "The same reasons you'd have if you'd look for them."

Low as his voice was, he said that with a ferocity of intonation which was convincing proof that, for all his shell of suave composure, impatience and suspense were putting him to the torture. Here, at night, at the end of a trying day, his face showed how anxiety had preyed upon him. The hard jaw was outthrust as usual, but there were deep shadows under his eyes, and weariness in his normally expressionless glance.

Barrone was, Vail reflected, on as great a strain as he. If this were not true, the Saragondan would never have been guilty of the tactical blunder of a second time trying to force Miss Domenza to disregard her instructions. He would never have risked his appearing powerless in face of Margarita's refusal, a refusal which normally he would have foreseen and avoided.

Or had he chosen to undergo that minor humiliation for the sake of convincing his three associates that there was real danger of Margarita's being arrested?

And, having prepared them to expect such an outcome, was it his purpose to crush her? If he now possessed, or hoped to secure, evidence that seemed to connect her with the Whiteur case, he would use it in a moment to break her to his will, or, failing that, to have her arrested.

The latter assumption seemed far more reasonable than to suppose that Barrone, in a moment of folly, had stultified himself with the fruitless ultimatum to Miss Domenza. And, if it were true, she was in danger of molestation not only by Willoughby and his agents but also by Barrone.

Vail felt a constriction, like cold, about his heart.

CHAPTER XIII

THE INTRUDER

Vail awoke with a start, his brain clear on the instant. Drawn up on his elbow, he listened, trying to locate the noise which he thought had aroused him. But the silence was untouched. Washington is a city that sleeps soundly in the small hours of the morning, and not even the rumble of a street car, near or distant, was to be heard.

He lay back upon his pillow, attributing his awakening to worry. He had had trouble in getting asleep. Worn out as he was physically, his brain had been too crowded to relax. He had now reached the point where he felt incessantly an abnormal tenseness. His smile was readier even than formerly, but only to conceal the fact that inwardly he responded in exaggerated ways to the ordinary stimuli of life. A keen observer would have noted that his face showed strain.

Admitting that he was too deeply into the affair to withdraw, he nevertheless found himself wishing again and again for a way out satisfactory to himself. Barrone and von Palz annoyed him with demands that he do the impossible in hurrying Barfield to act. He had stated the matter accurately in telling Margarita Domenza that she and her safety amounted to an

obsession with him. He was continually thinking of ways to protect her in any one of a dozen different contingencies. And added to the harassing burden of his solicitude for her was the puzzle of her personality.

Why had she put him off so, down there in the drawing-room? Why had she so terribly indicted herself? There was no evil in her! And yet, she had——

He sprang to a sitting posture on the bed and listened again. Something, lighter than a whisper, had come to his ears. From downstairs. It was repeated, a movement of some kind, the light tap of a heel, or the click of metal.

His room was over the dining-room and therefore on the same side of the house as the office downstairs. Barrone, whose snoring was at that moment audible, was across the hall from him, Lemale on the top story. Vail slipped on his moccasins and, in his pyjamas, went noiselessly through his open door and out into the hall. Standing still to listen, he could detect neither voices nor movement.

He was about to turn back when it occurred to him that, with detectives interested in his and Barrone's affairs, it might be as well for him to investigate.

Moving cautiously, he had gone half-way down the stairs when his eye, not his ear, sent the alarm to his brain. Looking over the banisters, he saw at the bottom of the closed door of the office a blade not so much of light as of a darkness thinner than the rest of the night, a line of grayness like the reflection of a

light weak or far away. There was somebody in the office!

Stooping, he rolled up the legs of his pyjama trousers half-way to his knees. In that silence any sound, even the rasp of cloth on cloth, might be discernible to a person on guard against interruption. With each step a slow and painstaking procedure, he reached the bottom step. From there to the office door was a distance of seven or eight yards.

As he lifted his right foot to take the first step, a noise, sharp and incisive, came out to him. He recognized it as the one faint squeak always made by the swinging open of the door of Barrone's safe.

He went forward, lifting his feet high and lengthening his stride, his progress leaving the stillness about him unbroken. The light from the street lamp at the corner forty yards away made no impression on the darkness in the hall. The silence was so profound that imagined noises, like a fairy humming, filled his ears.

His hand was on the knob of the door when for the second time he had definite evidence of stealthy activity in the room to which he was now so close. This time it was a thin, shirring sound, the crackle of heavy paper and the slurring of one page sliding upon another. He began to turn the knob with an infinity of caution. So alive were his fingers to the mechanism under his touch that he knew when the latch had been withdrawn just far enough to release it from the hasp.

Beginning the precarious business of opening the

door, he pushed it forward a hair's breadth at a time, grasping the knob firmly to prevent the latch clicking back from the spring. A crack appeared between the door and the jamb, a gradually widening line of light. He heard plainly the rustle of papers passed hurriedly through a person's hands. The door was far enough open now for him to thrust his head through the aperture.

His plan had sprung, wholly formed, into his mind as he stood there absorbed in the task of silent entrance. He would get a good look at the person or persons in the room and thus, before they could turn and run or put out the light, recognize them if they were already known to him, or retain a reliable mental picture of them if they were strangers. That accomplished, he would spring upon them and at the same time cry out to alarm Barrone and Lemale.

He stooped, moving his head forward and to the side. His forehead was now beyond the edge of the door, the back of his head grazing the jamb. His eyes went beyond the door. He could see across the room to the safe, the door of which hung wide open.

A woman was on her knees before the safe, a sheaf of papers in her hands. While he perceived this in the first instant of his conscious vision of the scene, he was at the same moment aware of a strong and unexpected glare just above his eyes. It came from an electric torch which had been placed on top of the safe so as to throw a thin stream of light on the door at the level

of a man's face. His stooping posture had kept its direct rays from blinding him. The woman was examining the papers under the light of a second torch held above her shoulder by a man standing near her.

Beside the torch on the safe was a mirror placed at such an angle that, by glancing up from the papers, she could see the reflection of the door which Vail had opened. Evidently, she had detected nothing until he had put his face half-way into the room, presenting a patch of white against the dark oak of the door on the one side and the jamb on the other. The slow coming away of the door from the jamb, both being the same color and substance, she had not noticed in the rapid shift of her eyes from the white paper to the mirror.

All this was telegraphed to Vail's brain by his first glance—all this and the fact that the kneeling woman was Margarita Domenza.

But as his eyes focused upon the scene, hers detected his reflection in the mirror, and her free hand went up to the torch on the safe, extinguishing it. At the same time the man, taking alarm, snapped off the light in his hand.

In the darkness that followed, Vail heard first the papers swirl from the woman's hand to the floor, then a step. Instinctively he put his finger on the button in the wall near the door controlling the electric lights of the room. Lemale had left only one of them turned

on, a large, green-shaded lamp on the desk near the front window.

Its soft glow revealed Miss Domenza in street dress standing in front of the opened safe, the papers scattered at her feet, and on her right, a few inches nearer Vail, a swarthy, round-shouldered man with dropped jaw and staring black eyes, struck motionless by fright.

Vail stepped into the room and noiselessly closed the door.

Miss Domenza, a smile of surpassing bitterness on her lips, was the first to speak.

"You won't hold this man?" she said.

She did not speak in a whisper, but in a voice so low and governed that the words barely reached as far as Vail's ears. He had the sensation of straining forward to catch them, like a man putting out a hand to grasp a line that is thrown toward him and falls inches short.

"He was merely my assistant; to open the safe," she continued without a pause, "an instrument helpless under my command."

Then, taking Vail's acquiescence for granted, she instructed Carias, the man of 47 B Street, Southwest:

"Go, Gregoric; the way we came in."

Carias tiptoed the few strides to the dining-room door, which they had left open for purposes of swift retreat, and vanished into the darkness beyond. Al-

though he had to make his way through the pantry and kitchen, across the back porch and down the steps to the alley door, not a sound came back to the two he had left in the office.

Miss Domenza was again the first to speak, looking with steady eyes at Vail who stood nearly the width of the room from her, subjecting her to a prolonged scrutiny. It was as if his mind challenged what he saw.

"I told you I was not the sort of woman you thought me," she said, her hands clasped behind her, the bitter smile still at the corner of her lips.

Unconscious of his pyjamas, he crossed over to her, careful to make no noise, and whispered:

"What do you want here?"

He was haggard. There was a pinched look about his lips. He trembled like a man stricken by ague, and, raising his hand to his forehead as though to put pressure on his thoughts, brought it away dripping wet.

She in her turn asked a question:

"What are you going to do with me?"

Even in that moment he was conscious of the power that emanated from her. It was in her eyes, saddened as they were. It was in the poise of her body as she confronted him, her hands behind her, her shoulders well back and head high. She was a woman infinitely brave but fully conscious that calamity was upon her. Her eyes, he felt, had that agonized look, not because

he had thus detected her or from fear for herself, but because of the cost of this failure to her plans.

Suddenly he knew why she had committed the burglary, or commanded it.

"You came here to discover the whereabouts of the ammunition ship!" he declared, the hissing sound of his whisper hanging about his ears like the curling of a whip after he had said the words.

"Yes," she admitted in the low, measured tone which still, when he was only inches away from her, almost fell short of his hearing; "I had to."

"Why?"

"Because he refused to give it to me," she replied; "and I am ordered to get it."

They regarded each other a long time, so long that, before either spoke again, a clock in the lounge upstairs struck the three quarters of the hour and left the echoes of its chimes, enlarging circles of sound on the pool of silence around them. She realized that he was trying with all his strength to think, to reason, to decide on what course he should follow in regard to her. She knew, too, that he could not have forgotten her interest in his home a few hours ago, a pretended interest to enable her to plan the burglary.

He asked her a surprising question:

"Why are you so determined not to give Barrone the signal code?"

She answered without a moment's hesitance.

"If I gave him that, he would try next to get the concession documents from me. That done, I would no longer be a factor in this work. And with that assured, my arrest would no longer be an inconvenience to him." She paused, intending to say more but taking time to make her words exact. "He might in fact, under certain conditions, regard my arrest as a convenience—or protection."

They stood in the half-light from the shaded lamp like statues nicely balanced, inclined toward each other, their faces close together, she expecting a disclaimer from him of what she had said, he marveling at her confirmation of his opinion of Barrone's tactics.

She saw his face change, his features softening slightly in their twisted pattern.

"It is possible," he agreed finally; "all that you say."

With the pronunciation of the words, he experienced for the first time a full realization of this woman's present plight. Barrone's habit of having the windows of the front part of his house heavily shaded and shuttered at night, even in May weather, protected her from being seen from outside. But, if Lemale or Barrone should awake and come downstairs, she would be hopelessly lost. The thought found instant expression.

"But this risk!" he said, aghast at its possible results.

"Yes," she agreed; "I know it is a crime. I've asked you what you were going to do with me. I have not asked you to show me any consideration."

He started to answer that, but instead stooped down and gathered up, one by one, the scattered papers.

She stood, stock still, looking down at the back of his head.

"Put these together, just as they were in the beginning," he instructed when he rose. "Can you do it?"

She nodded and held out her left hand, showing him the rubber band which she had taken off them and which she had held all this time. She rearranged the papers, slipping the band on the package they made.

"Put them back in the safe where they belong," he directed.

She did so.

"Did you get the paper you wanted?" he asked, his eyes as sad as hers. "The information?"

"No."

"And the papers you've put back, are they the only ones you had disturbed or examined before I came in?"

"Yes."

He moved a hand toward the pigeonholes in the safe.

"Are they exactly as you found them? Can you tell?"

She bent down and examined them, giving the task all her attention. About to turn away, she stopped and put out a steady hand, slightly changing the position of the package she had replaced.

"Yes," she decided. "That's it now, I'm sure."

She was facing him again, erect and calm save for her deep, almost painful breathing. The silence was absolute. The imagined noises, the fairy humming, filled his ears.

He extended his hands a little way, the palms toward her, and let them drop to his sides, a dumb show that he could say but the one thing, see but the one way.

"I shall let you go," he said.

She looked at him without a sign of relief or rejoicing.

"And protect me?" she asked. "Say nothing about it?"

"Exactly," he answered, and bowed, not in a spirit of gallantry, she perceived, but as an involuntary bodily expression of the heaviness of his spirit.

Her lower lip quivered. She drew in her breath with a sharp, sibilant sound.

"You give me," she said, the bitter smile again on her lips, "more than I deserve."

He bent and, slowly pushing the safe door shut, turned the knob of the combination two or three complete circuits.

Straightening from that, he took her by the hand.

"Come!" he whispered.

She glanced at the mirror with the extinguished torch beside it on top of the safe.

"Leave them to me," he urged, and led her toward the dining-room door.

She obeyed the guidance of his hand, but without haste. She was calm now, remote even. With her deliverance assured, she displayed no panic of relief. As sure-footed and silent as he, her hot hand in his, she followed him through the blackness of dining-room, pantry and kitchen to the porch.

There he stopped, releasing her hand.

"Go!" he said. "Carefully."

She lingered.

"My thanks to you, my friend," she began. "My gratitude——"

Her voice broke. A sob, or the sound of a word choking her with its burden of emotion, came to him light as the falling of a feather. Her hand, by either accident or design, touched his.

He knew nothing but her presence, her nearness; and her momentary storm of feeling, making her all feminine and alluring, tempted him to take her into his arms and rain kisses upon her face, like a white flower in the darkness there beside him.

"Go!" he whispered, and stepped back from her.

His eyes, accustomed to the outer darkness now, followed her progress across the porch and down the steps. The signal that she was safely gone came with the faint click of the latch of the alley gate.

Returning to the office and setting things there to

rights so that no one could suspect the intrusion, he felt an anguish of concern. Not to make a sound, to remove all signs of the extraordinary scene, became a terrific labor. He was weak; his hands trembled; his fingers fumbled. He knew that, if Barrone should appear and demand an explanation of his presence in the lighted office at this hour of the morning, his wearied brain would be unable to drive his tongue to plausible pretense.

He gathered up the mirror and the torch, and put back in its original place a chair which he had lifted to one side to give Margarita Domenza straight passage from the safe to the dining-room door. Carias' heavy and dusty shoes had made a medley of smears on the hardwood floor in front of the safe. He took his handkerchief and, going down on his knees, scrubbed away the obvious evidence. Rising, he selected the least dusty end of his handkerchief and wiped off the whole door and face of the safe, to do away with possible finger prints.

When he was ready to snap off the light, he was so shaken that, unable to control his forefinger, he thrust in the push button in the wall by clamping the whole palm of his hand over it.

CHAPTER XIV

A PECULIAR GENIUS

Mr. Eugene Willoughby called on Mr. Carston Vail again Wednesday afternoon, and again awaited him in the drawing-room of the Q Street house. There was a cordiality in this meeting which their first interview had lacked. In spite of the fact that the detective began with an admission of failure, his manner had even more snap and bounce than before, while Vail approached the encounter with a front of warm and drawing geniality. He was determined to do some questioning on his own account. He was as eager as his visitor to keep abreast of every development, big or little, in this case in which two days ago he had professed himself entirely uninterested.

"The coroner's inquest," Willoughby related, a long, unlighted cigar in his right hand, "proved nothing. Same old verdict: 'death by strangulation at the hands of a person unknown.' And to-morrow the body, unidentified and uncalled for, goes into a temporary vault, in case the need of further inspection of it comes up."

Vail indicated his sympathy for police officials thus inconvenienced.

"But say!" Willoughby exclaimed with an air of

real, not to say affectionate, concern. "You're not up to snuff yourself to-day! Look a little done up, don't you?"

Vail affected an appreciative surprise.

"Do I?" he returned. "There's nothing to do me up, so far as I know."

"In which you're different from your friend, Mr. Barrone," the detective commented, his tone congratulatory.

"Yes?"

"Yes. You wouldn't care to be in Mr. Barrone's shoes just now. I shouldn't. In fact, I believe the reticent Saragondan finds his own feet a little pinched."

Vail, smoking meditatively, made no comment on the information.

"There are," Willoughby continued, "certain facts embarrassing to Mr. Barrone. There is a case against him. I shall state it to you briefly——"

"But," Vail prodded, "why not state it to Barrone? He can look after himself, can't he?"

"I have stated it to him, but without securing the admission that he thought it important. Moreover, it has a certain interest for you. If you'll allow me?"

"By all means!" Vail said heartily.

"It's like this." Willoughby wagged the unlighted cigar to emphasize his facts. "I found Barrone's visiting card this morning behind the radiator in the bathroom of Number Three-twenty-seven in the Wareham. It was folded once and had a piece pinched off of one

end. On the card was penciled in Barrone's handwriting the street number of this house and its telephone branch and number. As the murder room has been unoccupied since the crime occurred, the card must have been accidentally kicked under the radiator the evening of the tragedy. Do you get it?"

"What?"

"Why, that the card's being found in the bathroom is evidence of one of two things. Either Miss Whiteur, to whom he had given it on some previous occasion, dropped it there; or else Barrone dropped it earlier in the evening. If he did that, it had to be before he was called to the murder scene by Lemale, because on the latter occasion he didn't enter the bathroom or go appreciably near it. Get it?"

"Surely; the way you put it," Vail assented with a flattering absorption in the elucidation.

Willoughby, using the cigar as a pointer, continued:

"Add to this the fact that a maid in the hotel positively identifies Barrone as the man whom she saw with his hand on the door-knob of room Number Three-twenty-seven at twenty-seven minutes past ten the night of the murder. Add to that the fact that he was evidently just leaving or on the point of entering Miss Whiteur's room. Add to that the fact that a minute later a man fitting Barrone's description refused to take the down elevator on that floor, an incident described by the elevator operator, Ferguson, which shows that the suspect was loitering in the short

corridor waiting for another chance to approach Number Three-twenty-seven unseen. It piles up, doesn't it?"

"It seems to. But is that all?"

"A searching question!" Willoughby applauded. "It's not all. But that leads me to a question which I've got to ask you. Where were you night before last—that is, Monday night—when you were absent from von Palz's poker game from twenty minutes past ten until ten minutes of eleven?"

The question, swiftly put, took Vail by surprise, and he showed it.

"Why?" he retorted.

"It's simple enough why," the detective answered, his tone entirely friendly. "If you don't tell me, you'll have to tell the prosecuting attorney. Whereas, if you do tell me, and the answer's satisfactory, I can save you from bother by that gentleman."

"But why should he be interested in it?" Vail persisted.

"Because every man connected with this case—and you are distinctly connected with it through Miss Whiteur's having telephoned for you—will be compelled to account for every minute of his time that night or be brought under suspicion and investigation. You and Barrone were somewhere in the Wareham when the woman was murdered."

"And—?"

"Therefore, you and Barrone will have to prove

that you were not in room Number Three-twenty-seven."

Vail put his hand to his head, running his fingers through his hair. He stared at the table, thinking. A flush rose to his cheeks.

"Look here!" he said, like a man appealing to a trusted friend. "If I tell you, Willoughby, I can rely on you to protect me, of course? If it satisfies you?"

"On the word of a gentleman," Willoughby assured him.

Vail's flush deepened.

"It's a matter of protecting a woman's name," he explained; "a good woman's."

"All right. Let's have it. The prosecuting attorney'll take my say-so."

"Under any and all circumstances?"

"He will."

Vail forced himself to the statement.

"It's a silly business. One of those foolish things that can cause tragedy if not properly handled. This woman is a friend of mine. I like her immensely. She's clever; charming. For some unaccountable reason, her husband became jealous of me, fixing upon a certain incident as ground for his feeling, although he was grievously mistaken. Another lady, a friend of the lady who is my friend, was stopping at the Wareham night before last, and earlier in the day she had called me on the 'phone and asked me to come to her room at about twenty minutes past ten that evening.

She wanted to warn me as to my friend's desire that I see no more of her, for a while at any rate; and that was the only time she could see me alone that evening. That explains where I was. It was, I may say, quite far from the third floor."

"Ye-es," the detective said with a drawl.

"Well!" Vail exclaimed warmly. "Doesn't that satisfy you? You don't presume to doubt it, do you?"

"My dear sir!" Willoughby protested. "Of course I don't doubt it. I accept it in its entirety. I was merely thinking. Of coincidences."

Vail renewed his search for information.

"I don't see," he objected on a note of inquiry, "why you've come to me when your case against Barone is so strong. Why waste the time?"

"But I haven't a tight case against him! The situation is still this: either he did the murder, or the woman in black did it."

Vail smiled his unbelief.

"You stick to the woman theory, do you? Why? The murdered woman was choked to death; and it requires a man's strength to kill that way, to prevent all outcry."

Willoughby rejected the idea.

"Any athletic woman," he argued carelessly, "could have done it. Easily."

Vail was silent, reluctantly realizing that his mind had turned instantly to the moment on the Chevy Chase tennis court when the first ball of Margarita

Domenza's service had been swift enough to twist the racket in his hand. In the instant that he exerted his will to put the thought away from him, he appraised the wrist power required for that stinging drive.

"As I told Mr. Barrone this morning," Willoughby continued, "it's a toss-up between him and the woman in black. Felton Wilmeth's the man who'll call the turn. Let me find him, and I'll be on my way to clearing up this case. How about this mysterious dame now, Mr. Vail? Can you give me any help with her yet?"

Vail met that with a thrust.

"Somehow," he replied, "I've an idea that I'd be the last person in the world to be able to help you in that respect."

The detective lit the long cigar.

"It's unfortunate," he regretted. "This case oozes mystery in too many directions. It will hurt somebody before it's done."

The words carried sufficient color of threat to arouse Vail's curiosity, even his concern. To serve his own ends, he indulged in speculation.

"I was wondering what Barrone's attitude might be," he said at a venture. "It's unsatisfactory to you, or you wouldn't have come to me."

Willoughby was glad to comment on that.

"Barrone," he explained, "is a peculiar genius who has hit on the still more peculiar theory that the best

way to keep out of the hands of the police is to treat them with profound contempt. Whenever I approach him, he's insulting."

"But how does he explain the discovery of his card in the Whiteur bathroom?"

"Says it's a forgery."

"And the maid's identification?"

"A lie out of whole cloth."

"Still," Vail confessed, "I don't see why you've honored me with this recital of your facts and theories."

Mr. Willoughby's face conveyed a hurt surprise that he should be suspected of hidden or tortuous purpose.

"Simply," he declared, "to suggest your recommending to your friend the advisability of his being frank with me, or if he feels he can't afford that, the wise course of employing a competent lawyer. To keep him from going behind the—er—bars, if I may use the grating and plebeian word."

Vail's eyes were sharp, probing the detective's.

"Your real reason," he inquired, a steely quality in his voice, "wasn't the hope that I, anxious perhaps for a third party's peace of mind, would help you to fasten the crime on Barrone if I could?"

Willoughby had his guard up.

"Is that your idea?" he countered.

"I'm asking you: is it yours?"

"Not at all."

Vail laughed, without expression.

"At any rate," he said, "I can't act as your agent

with Mr. Barrone. He's a man who looks after his own affairs."

Willoughby's lip curled.

"Well, he's doing it exceedingly badly just now," he retorted. "And, I might add, so is Miss Domenza. She's courting trouble as long as she refuses to tell me who she is."

"Why?" Vail inquired dryly.

"Because," Willoughby answered resolutely, "in the end I'm going to find out. That's as sure as shooting."

Vail laughed again.

"Still the phantom woman!"

"Not so phantom as you might think, or like to think," the detective contradicted. "She was real enough Monday night. She followed Miss Whiteur into the hotel. She was in the hotel a second time, on the floor above Miss Whiteur's. She was there for no honest purpose, or she would have come forward to identify herself before this. Then, there's the handkerchief."

"What handkerchief?"

"A crumpled one I found on top of the other things in Miss Whiteur's open suitcase. It had evidently been dropped there by the person who searched the bag. And it had an initial in one corner."

"What initial?"

Willoughby thought out the answer to that, his eye on the cigar.

"Sorry, Mr. Vail," he made up his mind; "there's a reason why I can't tell you that. Just now at any rate. But I can show you the handkerchief minus the lettering."

He took from his breast pocket a long envelope and from that a small, flat package covered with oiled silk. Unwrapping the silk, he disclosed a woman's handkerchief, filmy linen and lace, which he held out to Vail by one corner, his thumb concealing the initial.

"You recognize it?" he asked, a glint in his eye.

Vail leaned forward and fingered a corner of it, his face directly over it. A delicate scent came from it, and immediately his mind held a picture of a woman putting her hands to her hair, of a ray of light reflected from a beaded bag hanging from the uplifted arm, and of the perfume, strange to him and faintly perceptible, that had come with her into the hall. This handkerchief carried the same fragrance which characterized Margarita Domenza, which Vail had never noticed save in her presence.

He sat back and flipped his hand to one side, dismissing the handkerchief as a subject for thought.

"Of course," he said easily, "I know nothing about it."

Willoughby did not speak until he had folded it and wrapped the oiled silk around it.

"So you see," he remarked, carefully putting the package back into his pocket, "there's a real case against the woman you like to describe as 'phantom.'"

On the other hand, I don't forget, there's the case also against Barrone. Here are its high lights: his card in the Whiteur bathroom; his identification by the maid; his reticence when questioned; Miss Whiteur's having telephoned for him; and his absence from the poker game at the time of the murder."

"What does he say about that," Vail put in quickly, "his absence from the game at that time?"

Willoughby's smile was provocative.

"That's the coincidence I was thinking about," he replied. "The story he tells to explain his whereabouts at that time is, verse for verse, chapter for chapter, the story you tell to explain yours."

CHAPTER XV

AT THE LEGATION

Old Theodore Burton, Washington Society's "beau of a thousand seasons," turned to his hostess.

"Who," he inquired, "is that amazing creature dancing with the Belgian Ambassador?"

"My house guest, Margarita Domenza," Madame Bonilla informed him. "Haven't you met her?"

"If I had," the old bachelor replied with his exaggerated gallantry, "could I ever have forgotten it? Look, Madame! How she dances! A rose on its long stem bending to the light winds of summer! A Victory winged at the heels!"

It was nearly midnight. The Bonilla ball, now at its height, was the occasion of Margarita Domenza's formal presentation to capital Society, whose walls had promptly fallen before her. In a flame-colored gown embroidered in gold, she was the most conspicuous figure in that throng of famous men and gorgeously appareled women.

No other Legation drew to its functions such brilliant throngs as responded to the Bonillas' invitations. Madame Bonilla's popularity was not confined to the diplomatic set. The best of the Congressional crowd, the millionaire colony and the "old Washington" group

mingled here with the outstanding diplomats and their wives, and added to these was a sprinkling of artists and writers. Madame affected glitter and brilliance wherever she could find it.

Miss Domenza's triumph was, therefore, all the more noteworthy. The women envied her, which, as Madame explained, was a more trustworthy evidence of their admiration than kisses. She danced with two Ambassadors, half-a-dozen Ministers and a long list of Senators, Representatives, attachés and other men about town. Flattery was constantly in her ears. Attempted flirtations stimulated her. The spell of the music, the everlasting throb of the drums, the excitement of all that adulation, and the unceasing pursuit by men disputing with each other as to who might claim her for the next dance, put a new flower on her beauty, made her seem more exotic even than she really was.

Nor was her loveliness her only asset. In the intermissions and at supper, when a few consecutive minutes could be given to conversation, she saw again and again surprise leap to the eyes of diplomat or statesman as she made shrewd comment on the subject which he, pessimistic from long experience with the average Washington Society woman, gingerly advanced with faint hope of inspiring intelligent reply. The word went about that she was "as brilliant as she was beautiful."

Mr. Burton, refreshing himself for the third time

at a punch bowl pre-Volsteadian in both taste and effect, described in two sentences Margarita's conquering evening.

"That rare creature, a real Washington belle," he declared, bowing to the world in general, "has again appeared. Once in every ten years or so the good God favors us with a woman sufficiently blessed, inside and out, to live up to that title."

The ballroom was on the first floor at the back of the Legation. During the first intermission after supper Miss Domenza, beating a laughing retreat from importunate men, went up to the second floor and, passing the large drawing-room on her left, stopped at a door on that side of the hall. With her hand on the knob, she hesitated, taking a long breath, like a woman facing a tremendous task. Opening the door quickly, she stepped into a small apartment used ordinarily by Dr. Bonilla for his less important business conferences.

As she entered, Carlos Lemale in full evening dress rose to his feet.

She turned the key in the lock and stood a moment at the door silent.

"Ah-h!" he said, unconscious that he made a sound.

He was at the other side of a round table which stood in the center of the room. She was a little pale, but a smile, warm and welcoming, wreathed her lips as she advanced until only the table was between them. He watched her with cat-like alertness.

"It was kind of you to come, Mr. Lemale," she

said gratefully. "You had no trouble in getting in?"

He swallowed spasmodically, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down under the loose skin of his throat.

"None at all," he replied, the hoarseness of excitement in his voice. "I had the card you sent me."

She looked to one side for a seat.

"Pardon me!" he apologized and reached out his long arm to swing a chair round almost to where she stood.

As she sank into it, he took another, placing it so that only a small arc of the table's edge separated them. She rested her left arm, bare to the shoulder, on the table in front of him and, relaxing in the chair, smiled at him again.

His glance, uncontrolled for a second, was upon her arm.

Seeing this, she spoke quickly.

"I have a great favor to ask of you, Mr. Lemale," she said tentatively.

He grinned, indicating that he knew what was what.

"I suppose so," he retorted, "or you wouldn't have asked me to come here to-night uninvited."

Her eyes, suggestive under their lowered lids, contemplated him a moment.

"Yes," she acknowledged sweetly. "You are most obliging in being here."

Still vibrant with excitement and the exertion of dancing, she breathed rapidly. Something about her, an over-wary quickness of glance, perhaps, or a flutter

of her eyelids, betrayed the strain she was under. It might have been fear and repugnance bravely hidden; it might have been the genius of coquetry. Whatever it was, it got into his blood.

She put up her right hand and slowly pushed back the curls from her temple, her fingers thrusting them beneath the flame-colored bandeau. The gesture made him all the more conscious of her superb figure. His look went again to her arm and then to the marble perfection of her throat and neck. The strange, scarcely perceived fragrance which Vail had noticed when she entered the Q Street house Sunday evening, came to him in a wave. His thick lower lip, hanging a little away from his teeth, was suddenly moist.

“What is it you want?”

The question sprang from his lips as a cork is drawn from a bottle.

She moved, snuggling more comfortably into her seat; it had the effect of easy intimacy.

“You told me yesterday morning,” she reminded him, “that you would help Saragonda whenever you could.”

“Whenever,” he qualified, “you would show me the opportunity.”

“Yes. Well, I can give you the opportunity.”

She turned her hand on the table so that it lay palm up, and looked first into his eyes, then at her hand. There was invitation, hinted and shadowy, in her look.

His hands, which he had held clasped on his crossed

leg, fell apart and went together again, a convulsive movement.

"If it's to serve you," he replied, his eyes burning, "the promise holds."

She gave a contented sigh.

"It is to serve me," she admitted, her eyes softening under the fierce gaze of his; "but it is a big thing, and difficult, that I'm about to ask."

"It makes no difference," he declared, and swallowed hard, "if only it's possible!"

"I wonder," she said, her voice low and questioning.

Her whole presence was an appeal to him, that relaxed and familiar posture of her body yielding to the lines of the chair, her hand still open and outstretched upon the table before him, the droop of the corners of her mouth, the timid inquiry in her eyes meeting his.

He raised his hand to the height of the table, hesitated, let it drop back to his leg. He wanted additional proof of this incredible thing, her favor.

"Tell me!" he demanded huskily, his head thrust forward on his long neck.

"I must have," she complied in the same low, faintly disconsolate tone, "a certain paper which Mr. Barrone controls, possesses. . . . It is in his safe. . . . Although I am entitled to it, he refuses to give it to me. Nevertheless, I must have it. It is for the sake of Saragonda, for the sake of the whole Saragondan people."

She paused. He was motionless, his head extended toward her, his eyes shining with desire.

The throb of the drums, with now and then the wail of the violins, came up from the ballroom, muffled, far away.

"This paper, if it is anywhere," she resumed, "is in a packet of letters, the first of which is labeled in red ink 'Maritime.' This particular paper, as well as all the others in the packet, is in code. Even if you tried to decipher any of them, you would fail. The one I want is in a white envelope, sealed with wax and marked with indelible pencil 'D. C.' The packet is in the second pigeonhole from the left in the top row of the safe. I am entitled to it. It is, in fact, mine; and my happiness depends upon my getting it. Will you bring it to me?"

He touched his pendant lip with the tip of his tongue. His hand rose slowly to the level of the table, the crooked fingers grasping the edge. She let her glance move slowly from his eyes to her opened hand on the table and back again to his eyes.

A gasp caught in his throat as he put his hand, damp and tremulous, upon hers. His long, angular face was dead white. His lantern jaws seemed sucked in.

"Will you get it for me?" she begged a second time with fluttering breath.

His fingers closed roughly upon her hand, and a light such as she had never seen in a man's eyes shone in

his. A frown, quicker than thought, touched and left her forehead.

"Will I get it for you!" he said, his throat so constricted that he spoke barely above a whisper. "Of course, I'll get it for you if you care that much! If it means your happiness, oh——"

"When?" she interrupted, and slowly, firmly withdrew her hand.

"When do you want it?"

"To-morrow. To-day, rather; it's Thursday morning now; past midnight."

He was thinking, measuring his chances of success, looking down at his own hand empty now on the table.

"If not to-day, then to-morrow!" he promised, his breathing swift and audible. "I shall have to make my opportunity, get the combination. He has never given that to me."

"But you can do it, can't you?" she urged him, and sighed. She looked tired. "There is no doubt about it?"

His laugh boasted.

"You've got my promise. I'll keep it. How can I fail with you spurring me on, your kindness the prize of my success?"

He put out his hand and caught hers, and, holding it securely gripped, closed his left over it also. He rose from his chair, leaning his weight on his elbows on the table, his face close to hers.

"Ah!" she protested sharply and, freeing her hand with a quick turn of her wrist, drew back from him. "Aren't you just a trifle unreasonable?" She laughed, lightly mocking, to soften the repulse. "Expecting so much for so little done?"

"But you—you make a man crazy!" he said wildly. "You know you can——"

She rose so quickly that he started back from her and stood erect.

"Wait!" she commanded, and laughed again, her lips feeling stiff. "First bring me that sealed envelope! And remember to leave the remainder of the packet undisturbed, so that Mr. Barrone when he opens the safe will notice nothing out of the way unless he looks for this particular paper."

"And if the envelope doesn't contain what you expect? What then?"

His pale face had a curious, puffy look, as though swollen by an ugly process. He showed her a disagreeable assurance.

"For shame!" she cried, and started toward the door, looking smilingly at him over her shoulder. "Does the fear of failure make you try to bargain in advance?"

She herself was pale now save for a red spot, like the color of fever, in each cheek. She turned the key in the lock and, facing him again, addressed him seriously:

"You will not fail me, will you?"

He started forward, his face contorted, but she had judged her distance accurately. Before he could reach her, she had opened the door and was gone.

Ten minutes later, radiant, with laughter on her lips, she returned to the ballroom and at the door met Carston Vail. His face wore signs of the haggardness she had seen there in the light of Lemale's green-shaded desk lamp.

"So!" she said in a tone no warmer than she would have used with any of the men she had danced with during the evening. "You're here after all!"

He had noticed the quick change that came over her in the first moment of their encounter, noticed that, although her laugh was but the slightest bit off-key, it was so only because of the unfailing power of her will.

"Yes," he replied, drawing her aside from the fast forming crowd of candidates for a dance with her. "I hadn't intended to come, but at the last I couldn't break my promise to Madame Bonilla. Besides, why shouldn't I be here? And why shouldn't you give me this dance?"

"Why not, indeed?" she acquiesced, and floated out with him into the crowd.

She disliked to discuss anything of importance with him while dancing; their positions were such that she could not conveniently see what meaning was put into

his words by the play of his features. But there were two questions which she desperately wanted him to answer.

"Did you arrange about Paul Menes?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, his voice strong and even; "as soon as I got the documents you sent me this morning. It's a certainty that he will be detained at Ellis Island for at least five days."

"And Barfield?" she pursued anxiously. "Will he hurry?"

"I haven't even seen him. The best I could do was to make an appointment with him for to-morrow. He's a busy man. Anyway, I have small hope of his acting before Monday. He insists he'll not pledge the Administration to us until he has that report from Olua to make his stand strong enough. I can't blame him for that."

They danced in perfect step, he tall and slender, blond, straight as an Indian, and she the loveliest woman in the room, her head high, a brilliant figure all gold and flame-color.

"I'm glad you're dancing with me," she said seriously after a pause between them. "If you hadn't, it would have seemed queer—to the Bonillas. But I'm surprised, too."

"Why?"

"That mirror on the safe," she replied, her face closer to his ear for caution's sake, "and the electric torch, both arranged to detect the approach of possible

intruders. They indicated a long experience, a repulsive skill, in work of that sort."

"The man did all that for you," he said. His voice was the voice of absolute confidence. "I knew that the moment I saw it."

Without breaking their step, she fell away from him enough to look up into his eyes.

"Either," she gave her decision, her smile an enigma, "you're the most recklessly trusting man on earth, or a most charitable judge of human nature!"

*'H.B.' Surely if you, but have
to become a scholar, do read
this book. I will create the
of speaking in you. The*
B. B.

CHAPTER XVI

"JUST A COINCIDENCE"

The Honorable Francis I. Barfield, Assistant Secretary of State for the United States of America, sat in his luxuriously furnished office in the Government's ugly, gray building on upper Pennsylvania Avenue and considered the morning's mail and an insistent caller. The Honorable Francis had a large, round head and a large, bull-like neck. He had secured his experience in diplomacy by herding steers and voters on the prairies of a Western State.

"No," he said, and put a capacious hand on the neat stack of letters in front of him. "I can't do a thing, Carston, before I get that report. You know that!"

Vail put forward one more argument.

"But as long as you know what will be in the report anyway, why do we have to wait?"

Barfield wheeled in his revolving chair and, with his hands on the ends of its arms, looked at Vail with decided exasperation.

"When we're putting over a thing like this," he explained, "we've got to be able to *prove* everything. Where would we be if our man down there dropped dead to-day? We've got to be provided with facts that

we can show if questioned. We can't go on the theory that everybody will take my word for everything!"

"And the report will reach you Monday? No sooner?"

"Sunday, possibly; but I don't expect it. Plan, as you've been doing, to hear from me Monday. This is Thursday; you haven't got long to wait."

Mr. Barfield extracted an immense black cigar from a vest pocket, bit off its end noisily and stuck it into his mouth tilted toward his left eyebrow.

"And for God's sake, Carston," he went on, gruffly pleading, "don't do anything careless! I can't see what's come over you here lately. We have this thing all nicely framed, and first thing I know you get nervous and fidgety for the first time in your life and haunt me—haunt me, by thunder!—begging me to hurry up and do a fool stunt! You even look fidgety."

He reached for his mail again, and Vail got up.

"You're the doctor just now, Frank," he said, not troubling to hide his irritation; "and if your head's set, it's set, I suppose. But if anything goes wrong, don't say I didn't warn you."

"Warn hell!" the Honorable Francis growled. "It's all right. Leave it to me. Monday."

Vail left the building and started down the Avenue toward Fifteenth Street. On his left the vivid green of the grass and trees of La Fayette Park was varied by the pinks, purples and yellows of the blooms in

flower beds large and small. On his right were the White House grounds, green and gorgeous with blooms, in their midst a globular, mass fountain shining in the sun, like a tremendous crystal ball shattered into countless sparkling atoms every second, and every second re-formed to break again.

Automobiles, open to the fresh May morning, whizzed past him. Children were playing in the park. Leisurely men and woman loafed on the park benches. City visitors strolled about in every direction. On all sides was gayety, light, color, beauty, ease—Washington at its bubble-like best.

“Washington!” he thought. “Washington with its surface smooth, radiant and lovely; and under cover a lot of people over-playing their hands, or reaching for too much, or paying too high in honor and self-respect for what they get, or falling down on stuff that’s too big for their puny heads and hands to carry off!”

As he went down the Avenue, a taxicab with its curtains down rolled slowly around the northwest corner of the War, State and Navy Building and followed him. Directly in front of the White House he halted, apparently to examine more closely the flowers on the other side of the iron fence. The taxicab stopped twenty yards behind him.

His inspection of the view completed, he set out at a brisk rate which he held until he came to Fifteenth Street. There he turned suddenly and, retracing his path a few yards, stepped into the roadway of the

Avenue and brought the cab to an abrupt stop by the simple expedient of standing in front of it. As soon as he saw the brakes applied, he went to the right side of the taxi and without a word wrenched open the door.

Inside was Carlos Lemale, speechless with surprise.

"I thought so!" Vail said angrily. "What are you up to, shadowing me this way?"

Lemale found voice.

"Shadowing you, Mr. Vail!" he protested incredulously. "The idea! This is—er—just a coincidence."

Vail slammed the door and went back to his car, which he had left parked in front of the War, State and Navy Building.

He found Lemale's employer alone in the office in the Q Street house.

"Ah!" Barrone said quietly, before Vail could begin his protest. "Your face tells the news. Barfield refuses to act before he gets that report."

Vail, his face flushed, took the chair at the corner of the Saragondan's desk.

"That's correct," he reported; "but there's something else."

"You took the words from my mouth," Barrone interrupted in the smooth, repressed tone he invariably used when controlling his temper with difficulty. "There's a good deal else! For one thing, I've a telegram from New York this morning informing me that the Whiteur woman was one of Lestrada's most trusted operatives."

Vail momentarily missed the point.

"Well?" he prompted impatiently.

"If that's true—and I know it is; the man who wired it has never gone wrong yet— Since that's true, it indicates that Miss Domenza, the most trusted of all the Santos agents, could easily have had a motive for— let's say—desiring Miss Whiteur's death."

Vail jumped in his chair.

"Or," he said sharply, "that you could have had the same motive!"

Barrone shrugged.

"Exactly," he agreed, "or that you could, or von Palz, or Forney. Any one of us. That's the trouble in it. It would convince the caressingly smart Mr. Willoughby that one of us had committed the murder. That is, if he knew the facts."

"Has anybody except you got this information about the Whiteur woman's identity?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then it's nothing to worry about at present," Vail decided, with a return of his irritability. "But this is; your secretary is now regaling himself by shadowing me."

Barrone seemed utterly surprised.

"Shadowing you!"

"Shadowing me," Vail repeated, and related the cab incident.

"Of course, I know nothing about it," Barrone declared, thinking hard. "He asked me to let him off

this morning. Private business, he said. Anyway, I'm going to fire him as soon as I can arrange for somebody to take his place. He's been tampering with that safe."

Vail in his turn was taken aback.

"Lemale has!" he said doubtfully. "How do you know he has? How do you put it on him?"

"By his finger prints," Barrone answered, adding with an unpleasant smile: "You don't think, do you, I'd have a secretary whose finger prints I didn't know?"

He reached down and, unlocking a shallow drawer on the side of the desk near Vail, opened it, exhibiting a small brush and can of powder such as are used to bring out finger marks.

"They're all over the front of the safe," he continued, "and on the flat surface of the combination knob. He has no business to touch the safe. He's never allowed to see what's in it, although, if he did, he'd learn nothing. The stuff that matters is in a code he'd never solve." He shrugged again. "But even that's a minor matter. This——"

He stopped to listen. There were footsteps and voices in the hall.

"Forney and the Count," he said. "I'll tell them too. Let's go upstairs."

As soon as they were in the lounge on the second floor Forney began with his own difficulty.

"Murder and molasses!" he burst forth. "I was

right. That siren Circe's in cahoots with Willoughby! I got the word from a Wareham bellboy. Fellow I've tipped enough to buy a steamboat. He says Willoughby's been up to Mrs. Lucille Leffington's room twice in the last four days."

Barrone was so tense from the effort of repression that his voice had a singularly clear-cut, rasping sound.

"We told you that to begin with," he commented. "You've kept away from her, I hope?"

"You bet I have!" Forney reassured him. "That woman couldn't give me another drink with a squirt gun!"

"But what I want from each of you," Barrone announced, dropping to a seat on the couch, "is your advice, the best you've got. I don't mind admitting that the whole situation is more disquieting to me than I had thought it could be. As I've just told Carston, I'm convinced my own secretary's treacherous. Also I'm uneasy about my cable communications with Olua and Quezalango. As soon as the thing broke, I sent messages down there asking our people for information about the Whiteur woman, who she could be, what woman had left Olua recently who might be identified with her, a lot of detailed inquiries like that."

"All right!" Forney put in excitedly. "Who is she?"

"The answers I got," Barrone resumed icily, his eyes meeting the Count's, "haven't satisfied me. They contain plenty of details, deal in much specula-

tion, and all that! But somehow the *feel* of them isn't right. I'm half inclined to believe they've been tampered with—down there."

Von Palz, half reclining in a Morris chair, ridiculed such uneasiness.

"They were sent in code, Barrone," he objected. "Besides, it's out of the question."

"Very possibly," Barrone agreed. "I told you I wanted advice. Perhaps I'm too suspicious, which a man can't be in a game like this. Anyway, such things are worth thinking about, particularly when they're coupled with Miss Domenza's stubbornness in regard to the code, and the practical certainty that she's going to be arrested any day now."

Forney put the question that Vail wanted to ask.

"What makes you say that?"

"I'm certain of it," Barrone answered, "from the questions Willoughby's asked me. His annoying me is a blind. He keeps after me to see whether I'll say anything he can use against her. That's his real game."

Vail, who had been leaning against the table with his hands in his coat pockets, straightened.

"Then what's all this leading up to?" he asked.

"My conviction that we've got to persuade Miss Domenza to leave town, to put as much distance between herself and the police as she can, while she can. In that event, when they wanted to arrest her, their necessary search for her would give us that much

more time if she were out of the city but in communication with us." He scowled. "She's got to go!"

"Yes," von Palz agreed. "There's sense in that."

Vail laughed dryly.

"She *has* gone," he said, taking out his cigarette case.

"*Has* gone!" Barrone echoed roughly. "Gone where?"

"I haven't an idea," Vail replied, lighting his cigarette. "I telephoned the Legation from down-town at ten o'clock this morning and asked to speak to her. The butler said she had left town twenty minutes before that, destination unannounced, length of stay a mystery."

"And Madame Domenza? Her mother?"

"Went with her."

CHAPTER XVII

MR. WILLOUGHBY SYMPATHIZES

At eight o'clock Saturday morning Miss Domenza, accompanied by her mother, returned to the Saragondan Legation, from which they had departed in haste during the forenoon of Thursday. At ten o'clock Mr. Willoughby's card was brought to Miss Domenza in Madame Bonilla's boudoir, where guest and hostess were engaged in laughing conversation.

The large drawing-room at this hour of the day had a particularly vast, imposing and dreary appearance. Its atmosphere, however, harmonized with the detective's new mood. Solemnity and dignity sat heavily upon him. He conveyed the impression of wishing to sympathize with the lady upon whom he was calling. A sad kindliness that had somewhat the appearance of a secret sorrow informed his face and gestures.

Miss Domenza did not react to his funereal pose. As before, her lovely and patrician face was innocent of expression, her gray eyes blank of interest. She took a straight-backed chair near the door.

Mr. Willoughby, having dragged forward an arm-chair so that he sat directly facing her with only a few feet of space between them, began the conversa-

tion in a voice that matched his lugubrious countenance. His remarks were in the nature of a harangue. This time, he explained with a windy sigh, he came not to annoy her but as a friend, and, while he was under the necessity of subjecting her to brief questioning, his most important message was advice. He counseled her to be unreservedly frank with him. The facts in his possession were such as to render any concealment on her part rash, not to say highly injurious. His one wish was to serve her and at the same time uphold the law.

As she listened to this speech, the slight and puzzling line of her lips which had bothered him before was again visible. Behind the mask of his sad sympathy he found himself once more trying to decide whether it indicated a dawning amusement or the beginnings of boredom.

"What do you want?" she inquired, uninterested.

Mr. Willoughby, mentally assembling facts with which to answer, was more than ever incased in sympathetic gloom.

"Suppose, Miss Domenza," he said, clearing his throat with a sepulchral sound, "I were to enlarge on my previous statement to you and tell you that on the eleventh of May, this month, a young lady closely resembling yourself sailed from Olua, the port of Saragonda, for New Orleans: that, after a boat trip of ten days, she arrived in New Orleans; that in New Orleans she picked up, or was joined by,

an old and white-haired lady; and that on Thursday, the twenty-third of May, a week ago from the day before yesterday, she and the old lady came to this Legation. Suppose I were to tell you all this as a matter of my infallible information obtained by cable from Olua and by telegraph from New Orleans and substantiated by inquiry here. Would it surprise you?"

She gave no sign of astonishment.

"Should it surprise me?" she returned.

"Suppose," he added, "I were to tell you that these ladies are now known in Washington as Madame and Miss Domenza, Parisian friends of the Bonillas, and that the young lady who sailed from Olua was also known in Olua and Quezalango as Miss Domenza. Would that surprise you?"

The ghost of a smile trembled about her lips.

"Yes, or no?" she asked. "Which is the suitable reply?"

"And suppose," he continued, still sadly sympathetic, "I were to tell you that on May the tenth, one day before Miss Domenza's departure from Olua, another young lady sailed from that port via another boat line to Havana; that she reached Havana on May seventeenth; that she landed in New York six days later, May the twenty-third, the same day that Miss Domenza and her mother arrived at this Legation; and that her name was Josephine Whiteur. Would that be news to you?"

"Yes," she said indifferently.

"Then I have to ask you, Miss Domenza: did you go to New York this past Thursday a week ago, May the twenty-third, the same day that you reached here?"

If at that her expression changed at all, it was to the side of boredom.

"Don't you know?" she retorted.

"The Legation officials and servants," he answered, "are evidently ordered to say that you and Madame Domenza kept to your rooms Thursday and Friday as the result of acute indigestion from eating fish on the train. But I am reliably informed that you, yourself, were in New York that Thursday evening and all of Friday."

"Yes?"

"Yes. Won't you tell me?"

"I should dislike to be the one jarring note in the Legation," she said, the play of her voice carrying the merest whisper of irony. "I should dislike to even hint that the people here are mendacious."

Mr. Willoughby's shroud of sympathy was now decidedly thinner.

"Is that all you have to say?" he asked solemnly.

"Isn't it enough?"

"Did you see Miss Whiteur in New York?"

"I was not in New York."

"Did you talk to her in Olua before you sailed?"

"No."

"You know nothing about the business that brought her to this country?"

"How could I?"

"I don't know. I'm asking you."

"No."

"Doesn't it seem a coincidence to you that the two of you left Olua on successive days; that she was murdered in Washington soon after you got here; and that, before she was killed, she tried to telephone to both Mr. Vail and Mr. Barrone, gentlemen who are friends of yours—one of them, Mr. Barrone, a friend of years' standing?"

Her eyes slowly opened very wide, expressing a great surprise.

"I," she reminded him, "am a Parisian. You may see it in all the newspapers of May the twenty-fourth. They published it as a Society item from the Saragondan Legation."

The shroud became, all of a sudden, a thing of rags and tatters.

"You stick to that, do you?" he asked aggressively. She sighed, tired by his fruitless pertinacity.

"Who am I to deny published and immutable fact?" she retorted.

"Put it another way then. Doesn't it seem a coincidence that this woman who was murdered tried to telephone to two of your friends, and——"

"I have told you repeatedly," she interrupted, without feeling, "that I know absolutely nothing about this

woman or her affairs. You will not ask me to do so again."

He changed his line of attack.

"What about this trip you've just come back from this morning?"

She was silent, her eyebrows lifted. Clearly she considered the question an impertinence.

"Nothing to say about that, Miss Domenza?" he insisted, a frown routing from his face the last shadow of sympathy.

"Naturally."

"All right!" His voice, going higher, threatened. "Maybe, then, you'll say something about this."

He took a long envelope from his breast pocket and, laying aside the oiled silk, held up the initialed handkerchief for her inspection.

If it interested her at all, he could not detect the fact. Her glance, touching it for the smallest fraction of an instant, went quickly to meet his.

"The initial," he pointed out, holding the handkerchief within easy reading distance of her eyes, "is a 'D.' And I found the handkerchief in Miss Whiteur's opened suitcase. As it was the only thing in the suitcase with a mark of any kind on it, the natural inference is that somebody who was in the room dropped it there while the bag was open. Isn't it?"

"Is it?"

She was now manifestly bored. She looked down to

one side at the floor, a procedure she would have employed to notify any tiresome caller that her attention was withdrawn from him.

Willoughby disregarded the signal; he was losing his temper.

"I ask you," he said; "is this handkerchief yours?"

"No," she replied with simple directness.

"Do you know anything about it? Ever see it before?"

"No."

He took his time in restoring the parcel to his pocket. Then, with the long pause as effective background, he sprang the surprise he had kept in reserve.

"Miss Domenza," he asserted, his manner domineering, "you were in the Wareham hotel the night Miss Whiteur was murdered."

She made no comment on it. In a subtle way that escaped his defining, she appeared to surrender a trifle more hopelessly to her boredom.

"You were on the fourth floor of the Wareham at a quarter past ten o'clock that night," he continued. "As you passed an open window on one of the corridors, the draught blew aside your veil. A person who was in the corridor saw you at that moment. This person has identified your photograph as a picture of the face then exposed to view." Enjoying the thrust, he added: "Your photograph also was published in the newspapers of May the twenty-fourth."

"Newspaper reproductions of photographs," she suggested, "are sometimes poor likenesses, aren't they?"

"Do you deny the accuracy of the identification?"

The thinnest of frowns indented her forehead.

"I have already told you, I believe, Mr. Willoughby," she protested in a low tone, "that I am not accustomed to being shouted at."

He sneered.

"Very well! Do you, or don't you, deny the identification?"

She rose, a new light in her eyes.

"Of course I deny it," she replied, her voice a warning.

He left his chair and stepped to one side, putting himself between her and the door.

"This high and mighty manner's all very well!" he said, "but there are things that can't be brushed aside or wished away. I'll suggest one or two."

Recoiling from him, she sat down again, her glance toward the floor.

"First," he went on, roughly accusing, "your attempt to build up all this mystery about what is proved to be your trip from Olua to Washington, not to mention your picking up in New Orleans the lady who may be your mother or a companion acting as chaperone and, therefore, a cover for your activities. Secondly, there's your equally mysterious trip to New York, where Miss Whiteur had just arrived. Then you rush

back to Washington; you are here ready to follow her into her hotel when she arrives; and you are in the hotel when she's murdered. Not only in the hotel, but in her room. You'll have a hard time fighting against that showing!"

She laughed, a short, sharp outburst of mirth such as, suddenly seizing a person, cannot be suppressed.

"Yes," she agreed, lips still curled to merriment; "if you can prove it."

"It'll be proved all right!" he snapped. "And you've made the stuff against you stronger by contending that you were at the theater all that evening!"

She gave him a look which made him feel that for the first time he had her full attention.

"Of course," she said, "if you had a case against me, you wouldn't come here merely to tell me about it. So I ask you: what is your motive in going over for my benefit everything you've got?"

The attack caught him unawares. His eyes wavered.

"I've told you," he insisted stubbornly. "I want to convince you, for your own good, that frankness is your one best chance."

The pupils of her eyes grew smaller.

"Which is another way of saying," she observed contemptuously, "that you hoped to persuade me to incriminate myself. You also hoped, failing that, to give me the idea that I might save myself further annoyance at your hands by trying to incriminate some-

body else. It's in keeping with your ridiculous talk of a Saragondan plot."

She stood up again, this time unmistakably determined to be rid of him.

"I'm tired of this child's play!" she informed him with cold finality. "If you ever send up your card to me again, I shall pay no attention to it."

He stood his ground.

"Is that so?" he retorted offensively, giving his anger rein. "Then I'll tell you something that will change your mind!" He took out his watch with a jerk and looked at it. "It's now a quarter past ten o'clock, Saturday morning. To-morrow evening, at eight o'clock, I'm going to make an arrest. I'm going to charge the person arrested with the murder of Josephine Whiteur. And, unless you or somebody else produces evidence to change my mind between now and then, the person arrested will be Miss Margarita Domenza, the Parisian friend of the Saragondan Minister!"

Her face was suddenly as innocent of expression, her eyes as blank of interest, as when she had entered the room. The thought struck him that every change he had seen in her countenance had been merely the appearance of emotion, assumed to play upon him for ends of his own.

She went to the wall and put her finger on a push button.

"Well?" he demanded sullenly. "What have you

got to say to that? Maybe you think I don't mean it! If you do, I'd advise you to——"

The butler's footstep sounded in the doorway.

"Luis," Miss Domenza directed, her voice low but clear, "show this man the door, please."

CHAPTER XVIII

FELTON WILMETH READS

It was a quarter to one, Saturday afternoon. White-clad and silent-footed, the nurse had removed her patient's lunch tray after bringing him at his request a copy of a morning newspaper. The roar and staccato rattle of Philadelphia's midday down-town traffic came, in all its nerve-racking volume, through the hospital window thrown open to the air and sunlight. Mr. Felton Wilmeth, propped up on his pillows, read with a casual eye.

He had a square, box-like head with shaggy eyebrows, and his lips showed the thin, hard lines of acquisitiveness. In his native city of San Francisco, California, he was known as a prosperous young dealer in real estate.

Like a surprisingly large number of his tribe, he was neither an habitual nor a thorough reader of newspapers. The real estate advertisements in his home town journals constituted in his eyes the world's best literature. This was the first time he had called for a paper since being taken from the train to a hospital in the City of Brotherly Love in the early morning hours of Tuesday last. A sharp but comparatively brief attack of influenza with an accompanying ob-

struction of his sinuses, had lowered his usually abundant vitality and prevented for four days the slight interest he might otherwise have felt in current events.

At the top of the first column of the second page of the paper he now held before him, his eye fell on an article dealing with "the celebrated Whiteur case," in which, the writer declared, there had been few developments during the past twenty-four hours. "One Felton Wilmeth," he continued, "is believed by the Washington police to be an important key to the mystery. Unfortunately the gentleman, a San Franciscan, seems to have vanished into thin air."

The effect of that on the patient was electric. He tossed the paper to the foot of the bed and, putting his finger on the bell button hanging near his head, held it there until his nurse hurried in.

"What time is it, Miss Tiffany?" he inquired excitedly, no longer leaning against the pillows.

"It's ten minutes to one," she answered in her most soothing tone, at a loss what to make of his agitation.

He reached under his pillow and brought forth his own watch.

"So it is," he muttered, and made a mental calculation, adding: "Plenty of time to dress and catch a train that will put me into Washington early this evening."

The nurse stared at him in amazement.

"What's that, Mr. Wilmeth?" she asked.

"Turn on the water in my bath, please; and bring up my bill while I'm dressing!" he directed by way of answer. "I'm going to Washington! I leave inside of an hour."

"But Dr. Lewis said this morning you couldn't possibly be in shape to leave the hospital before to-morrow morning!"

The rebellious patient made a quick decision. He had to talk to somebody. Why not to his nurse?

"Look here, Miss Tiffany," he said; "you've been reading about the Whiteur case in Washington, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes. The papers have been full of it."

"When I tell you I know more about that case, then, than anybody on earth, you don't blame me for getting back there hot-foot, do you?"

Miss Tiffany's interest in the murder did not obliterate her respect for the house physician's autocracy.

"But why can't you telephone to the police in Washington?" she argued. "Or write? Or, better still, wait another twenty-four hours until you have your strength back?"

"No sir!" Wilmeth insisted. "I go this afternoon. Why, I saw the two people who did the murder! Saw 'em a minute after they'd done it!"

Miss Tiffany's interest was all his at last.

"Two did it!" she cried doubtingly.

"I tell you I saw 'em!" he declared, hands trembling

on the counterpane. "First, the man on the fire-escape by Miss Whiteur's window. I'd stuck my head out of my window for a view of the searchlight on the Washington Monument. Her room window and mine opened on the same platform of the escape. Then a minute later, as I came out of my room to leave the hotel, I saw the woman walk out of Miss Whiteur's door. But I didn't suspect anything wrong then; and in another three minutes I was in a taxi on my way to the station."

"What became of the man?"

"I 'don't know. Didn't stop to see. Fact is, I thought he was doing what I was—looking at the monument."

Miss Tiffany was fitting this story to the newspaper accounts of the crime.

"But," she criticized, "the woman in black had a veil on."

"That's true," Wilmeth admitted. "They'll have to identify her. My evidence is only good because it proves she was in the murder room at the time the thing happened. But I can identify the man all right."

He caught hold of the covers preparatory to getting out of bed.

"Get my bill, won't you, please?" he asked with a return of his eager haste; "and turn on the water first."

Miss Tiffany remembered her orders.

"I'll have to call Dr. Lewis first," she said firmly.

"All right!" Wilmeth agreed impatiently. "Go to it! And while you're calling him, I'll be dressing. Bring the bill when you come back. Doctor or no doctor, I'm going to Washington as soon as wheels can take me there!"

Luncheon at the Saragondan Legation was almost over. Only the two Bonillas and Margarita were at the table, as Madame Domenza, still tired by the trip, kept to her room. The Minister, playfully complaining of the annoyances of diplomatic life, had made a witty story listing some of its nuisances.

"Nevertheless," Margarita contended, "it's a wonderful career. Diplomacy in its highest form is the art of picking the pockets of others' intentions. What could be more fascinating?"

"But there's another phase of it," Dr. Bonilla said on a graver key. "For instance, I had to spend all of yesterday and a part of this morning getting a gentleman out of a lock-up."

"But," Margarita interjected in mock seriousness, "does a gentleman ever get into a lock-up?"

"Well, then," the Minister qualified with a laugh, "a countryman of ours."

Madame Bonilla was surprised.

"A countryman!" she said regretfully. "You didn't tell me about that, Juan."

"I am about to do so, my dear," he replied affectionately. "It's a most unusual case. Extraordinary! Only one other like it has ever come to my attention. This man was stopped as he was about to land in New York. They hustled him off to Ellis Island, the Immigration station there, you know, and held him!"

Miss Domenza carefully put on her plate without a clink the fork she had been using with her salad.

"What was the charge against him?" she inquired with just enough show of interest to convince the Minister that he addressed an appreciative hearer.

"That's what Senator Roope asked when I appealed to him," the Doctor answered. "It's what Senator Gurley wanted to know when we asked his help. It was what I wanted to know!"

"But I don't understand," Madame confessed.

He laughed sarcastically.

"Neither did we!" he declared, indignant at the memory. "They were holding him, a citizen of Saragonda, on secret charges!"

The gray of Margarita's eyes became lighter, harder.

"Secret charges!" she echoed.

"Yes; and refused to let the Senators have an inkling of what they were!" He turned to Madame. "You know, my dear, what a good friend of mine Senator Roope is, and what his power is, being Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations; but even he was powerless."

"When was he arrested?" Margarita asked, her thumb and forefinger slowly turning a glass to and fro on the cloth in front of her.

"Thursday morning. And he wasn't allowed to wire me until yesterday morning! Of course, as soon as I understood the circumstances, I appealed to Roope and Gurley for help. The three of us met at the office of the Immigration Bureau yesterday morning at half-past ten. They——"

Miss Domenza, her eyes on the slowly revolving glass, interrupted, as though, according to her hearing, the Minister had come to a full stop."

"And his name?" she inquired, dropping her hands to her lap beneath the table.

"Menes. Paul Menes. And finally they agreed late yesterday afternoon, after haggling all day, to let me see the charges. Can you guess what they were?"

"I can't," Madame promptly gave it up.

Margarita met his gaze with contemplative eyes.

"That he was a Santos agent?" she ventured after the brief pause, like one enjoying a guessing game.

"Nothing so reasonable," he answered. "The charge, supported by detailed and enormous statements sworn to by people I never heard of—the charge read that he was a Spanish anarchist!"

She shuddered, a smiling pretense of terror.

"An anarchist! And you say he was released?"

"Certainly he was released," Bonilla replied, pleased with his part in the liberation. "As soon as I wired

a New York lawyer to represent him and got a fair hearing for him, they shot the charges all to pieces. He's a fellow who's made trouble of a sort in Saragonda. He was once a Santos sympathizer, by the way. But an anarchist? And a Spaniard? It is to laugh!"

Her interest lessened.

"An opera bouffe of crime," she said with a negligent smile. "What becomes of the 'anarchist'?"

"Menes?" the Minister returned. "He'll reach Washington this evening. Between eight and nine o'clock, I believe."

CHAPTER XIX

UNEXPECTED GENEROSITY

"Frankly, Mr. Vail, this is the inside of the thing: Barrone and Miss Domenza are both caught in the Whiteur trap. Each has something on the other. Each is afraid of the other's telling something. And each is afraid to tell anything. It's as plain as the nose on your friend von Palz's face!"

Mr. Willoughby, who had emphasized these statements with flourishes of his straw hat, dropped his headgear into one chair and himself into another, enjoying the astonishment registered by his companion's face. He had found Vail seated at the same window of the same exclusive H Street club that had been the scene of the detective's Tuesday morning session with young Peckham. It was mid-afternoon; and, the luncheon crowd having left, they had the place practically to themselves.

Willoughby, determined to ask Vail for help, had recognized the necessity of laying some of his cards on the table.

"I can't imagine how we've muffed it all this time!" he continued, his manner making the two of them partners in a regrettable stupidity. "You see it now, don't you?"

Vail shook his head in vigorous negation.

"No; I don't," he said.

In his own mind, however, he was far from successfully resisting the logic of Willoughby's conclusion. He recalled the statement Barrone had made to him, Forney and von Palz in the lounge Thursday morning that the detective's talk of arresting Barrone was a blind undertaken in the hope of his saying something to incriminate Margarita. Had Barrone really deduced that from the detective's words, or had he said it because, knowing he could incriminate her, he intended to do so if the need arose? He remembered also Margarita's deliberate assertion as she stood by the opened safe: "He might in fact, under certain conditions, regard my arrest as a convenience—or protection."

How could her arrest be a protection to Barrone unless it destroyed the possibility of his arrest on the same charge?

Moreover, if both Margarita and Barrone knew that her arrest might serve as his protection, did it not inevitably follow that they shared knowledge of facts incriminating to both?

He put the troublesome questions out of his mind; he would find undisturbing answers to them later.

The detective proceeded to elaborate his position. Mr. Willoughby was himself again, a marked contrast to the somewhat dashed and discomfited gentleman who, repulsed by the unresponsive and stone-cold Miss

Domenza, had been put to ignominious flight that morning by the supercilious escort of Luis, the butler. He knew now whereof he spoke, and was glad to demonstrate the fact.

"I don't see how you can take any other view of it!" he remonstrated. "You won't when you get the full picture. Barrone was in room Number Three-twenty-seven a short time before he was called there to view the woman's body. I've been over the facts with you providing that. Miss Domenza also was in that room a short while before, or at the very moment of, the murder. The initialed handkerchief, which seemed so insignificant to you as evidence, is proof of it. And it's corroborated by an affidavit in my possession that she was near the room at a quarter past ten."

He described her identification, by means of the newspaper photograph, as the woman in black.

Vail regarded that with instant suspicion.

"Why rely on a newspaper print?" he wanted to know. "Why not have this person meet her face to face?"

"It's impossible just now," Willoughby replied. "It will be done later, although I'm positive of the truth of the statement."

"But Miss Domenza was at the theater that evening! She showed you the seat coupons. Witnesses prove it."

Willoughby's smile was superior.

"Do they?" he returned.

"Yes. And there's Barrone's alibi. What if it is the same as mine? You believe mine!"

"But Barrone's," the detective countered dryly, "is another fish to fry. I don't believe him because he said he would tell the woman's name in open court if it was necessary but wouldn't tell me in confidence. Why shouldn't he tell me, when by doing it he insured the woman against disgrace, just as you did without a moment's hesitation? You get it? It's a bluff. There's no name for him to tell. There was no woman."

Vail still challenged the whole supposition.

"It's a weak structure you've built up, Willoughby," he asserted. "Have you anything else to go with it?"

"Yes. I had a talk with Barrone yesterday morning. It was the first time he's ever loosened up to me at all. He said little enough at that, but what he did say was to play his own game. And it bears out what I've just been telling you."

"How?"

"He was so dead anxious to assure me of Miss Domenza's innocence! It was entirely reasonable, in his eyes, that she should have disappeared from the Legation Thursday morning without telling anybody where she was going!"

The detective took one of his long cigars from his pocket and waved it up and down to put force into each of the short, quick queries which followed:

"Ever see a suspected man surprisingly keen on

freeing another? Ever get the hunch that nobody could normally be so worked up about a point? Ever think that he was talking to force a certain idea into your mind? Ever decide that he talked so dad-blamed much about it because he wanted you to think that the other perhaps wasn't so innocent after all?"

Vail was shocked.

"You mean," he asked, unbelieving, "Barrone made a sneaking attack of that sort on Miss Domenza?"

"He did."

"But you may have misconstrued him."

"Misconstruing people," Willoughby objected with a smile, "isn't what I'm paid to do, particularly when the stuff to be construed is set up in capital letters a yard high. . . . There's something else too. From Miss Domenza. . . . Pardon me! Have a cigar?"

Vail took one of his own cigarettes instead.

"She's nobody for saying what she doesn't want to say, and what she does say packs a lot of meaning," Willoughby continued. "The whole time I was there this morning she said only one thing that had a punch. She taxed me with trying to frighten her into incriminating somebody else so as to save herself!"

"Wasn't she right?"

"Right! Of course she wasn't right!"

"Nevertheless, I got a similar impression when you were talking to me about Barrone Wednesday afternoon. I asked you then, you may remember, whether you hoped that I, anxious perhaps about another party,

would give you something you might use against Barrone."

"Yes, I remember that," the detective admitted. "But I wasn't trying to give Miss Domenza any such lead. That's what makes her remark to me so valuable. It came entirely out of her own mind."

Vail pondered that.

"Just what do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean," Willoughby replied, bringing the cigar into play, "she misconstrued my tactics because she knew that, if she chose to incriminate Barrone, she could do it. I mean she would never have thought I was trying to frighten her into incriminating him if she hadn't been saying to herself: 'It's as imperative for me not to incriminate Barrone as it is to save myself!' I'm so positive of this because I had devoted myself entirely to establishing her guilt. Isn't the significance of her words clear to you?"

"No," Vail demurred. "The whole thing depends on how much your imagination has colored her statement."

Willoughby was unshaken.

"All the same," he contended, "I'm satisfied that Barrone and Miss Domenza were concerned in the murder and that each can turn up the other. . . . Now I come to my reason for hunting you up here. You've been obliging to me all through this affair, and I appreciate it. So now I want to help my own game and at the same time try to repay your kindness. If I may?"

"Why, certainly!" Vail responded to the real feeling in the proposal.

"I told Miss Domenza this morning," the detective said solemnly, "that I would arrest her to-morrow evening at eight o'clock unless she could change my mind before then."

The color drained from Vail's face as if it had been wiped off with a cloth.

"You told her that!"

"I did," Willoughby returned, unsurprised by the other's emotion. "I've got to make an arrest. I'm sure she and Barrone are guilty of the murder or have guilty knowledge of it, which would make them accessories after the fact. I'm going to arrest both of them."

Vail was regaining his composure. The blood came back to his face. The hand with which he put his cigarette to his lips trembled only slightly.

"You say you've got to make an arrest," he remarked. "Why?"

"The Chief of Police, my boss, has given me my orders. The public, his hydra-headed boss, has given him his. Washington has these mystery murders only about once every ten or fifteen years, and, when one comes along, the people think we ought to grab the murderer inside of thirty-six hours. You see the hell the papers are giving us. Damn it, man! Congress is even talking of investigating the Police Department

because we've accomplished nothing in a week's work on the case."

"But that's unreasonable!"

"All the same, it goes," Willoughby declared grimly. "And the Chief's right. He knows what would hit us if it got out that we refused to make an arrest with our hands full of evidence against two people!"

Vail's smile was one-sided.

"You spoke of repaying my kindness," he said with sarcasm. "Does this unexpected generosity of yours take the form of deciding to arrest two of my friends to-morrow evening?"

"I was just coming to that," Willoughby answered, unperturbed. "I don't want to make a mistake in this thing. If I'm wrong in arresting either one of them, it will ruin me. This case is already famous from Brazil to Siberia, and I realize the influence back of the two I'm accusing. So I fortify myself and give you a chance to save—your friend."

"How?"

"By going to her and assuring her that what I said was no bluff. By begging her to save herself if she can. By telling her that, if she can prevent an innocent man's going to disgrace, she should be merciful enough to do it. By making her understand that, if she can prove her own innocence by exposing the man she knows to be guilty, it's her duty to speak out before to-morrow night!"

Vail held his voice low to keep it steady.

"Then," he demanded, leaning forward to put a hand on the other's arm, "you know she can save herself? If she will?"

"No," Willoughby denied; "I don't know. I'm only hoping—for her sake."

Vail let his hand drop from the detective's arm and pushed back into his chair.

"And Barrone?" he mused. "I'll have to tell him too, you understand. It wouldn't be square, not to."

"Certainly. I want you to tell him! He's entitled to the same chance as she."

"But suppose he bolts?"

Willoughby put up his open hand and waved it to and fro in front of his face.

"Nay, nay!" he warned with a laugh. "It wouldn't be worth trying. How far could he go uncaught? At this stage of the game?"

Vail took the opening.

"Still, Miss Domenza got away unobserved Thursday, didn't she?"

Willoughby grinned and countered:

"Did she?" Then he added: "But it's a cinch that she was unobserved by Barrone. She had that gentleman properly worried. I wonder why."

It was Vail's turn to parry.

"Yes," he said, not grinning. "I wonder."

A PROMISE FULFILLED

In after years Margarita Domenza was to look back on this Saturday as the most cruel and exacting day of her life. She had begun it with the mental burden of Willoughby's intention to arrest her the following evening. At luncheon had come the news from Dr. Bonilla that Paul Menes, the one man who could bring disaster to her plans for the welfare of Saragonda, would reach Washington thirty-six hours ahead of the time set by Barfield for their consummation. And, brave and finished actress though she was, she felt that at last her difficulties challenged all her resourcefulness.

It was in this frame of mind that she was obliged to see Carlos Lemale. He had called at the Legation that morning, and, upon being informed that she was out, had left a note for her curtly stating that he would call again and would continue to call until she did see him. This, however, had not influenced her to her present decision so much as her feeling that he was entitled to the interview.

She received him in the small room on the second floor where she had obtained his promise the night of the ball to bring her the sealed envelope from Barrone's

safe. She was seated on the side of the table farthest from the door when he was shown in.

There were no words of formal greeting.

He came as far as the other side of the table and stood a moment looking down at her with an expression of mingled yearning and resoluteness which made her vaguely uneasy.

"Well, I'm here," he announced; and in his voice, as in his face, there was a curiously combined pleading and inflexibility.

The one window of the room, to which her back was turned, looked to the west, and the strong light from the late afternoon sun showed her the smallest lines in his face. It had a strength she had never seen there before, an unnatural forcefulness, as if the man were governed by an emotion which he had no wish to control.

She took comfort from the fact that Dr. Bonilla was in the room across the hall.

"Yes," she retorted. "I am sorry. I wrote you not to come. I wrote you early Thursday morning."

He answered that while seating himself to the right of the table so that, as in their previous meeting, only a small length of its edge was between them. He reached for the chair and adjusted it without once taking his eyes from hers.

"I've come," he said, "because I had to."

The end of his tongue momentarily touched his lower lip.

"Had to?" she echoed doubtfully.

His manner was possessive.

"Yes; had to," he replied. "I couldn't stay away from you. I remembered Wednesday night—and what good friends we were."

The finest tremor, like a shudder subdued, went through all her limbs.

"That," she told him coolly, "was a mistake."

His assurance did not diminish. He laughed incredulously, and adopted a tone of easy familiarity.

"You asked me, in this room, Wednesday night," he reminded her, "to do something for you and for Saragonda that nobody else could do. I did it for you. For you, you understand. And then you tell me not to come again!"

His eyes glistened unpleasantly. He was affected by his own voice. It was as if, having thrust himself into that much familiarity with her, he desired to be still closer to her.

"I don't understand," she replied coolly. "I wrote you, as I've said already, early Thursday morning. I told you that what I had asked wouldn't be necessary. I told you that, even if you accomplished it, I would not make use of it."

He laughed, on a note that she found peculiarly repugnant.

"But I had then accomplished it," he explained.

She did not believe him.

"That didn't affect my attitude," she commented.

He drew his chair a few inches closer to her.

"I had done it," he continued with a meaning she could not misconstrue, "because I wanted to please you. I knew it would win your favor."

"Oh," she said with a distaste that she had not meant to express, "I owe you an apology, an explanation." She spoke in a breathless hurry. "I needed the information in that envelope. By every right it was mine. If I could not get it, many people would suffer; Saragonda would be hurt. I was under terrific pressure. I felt that to get it by any means would be fair. And I yielded to the impulse to persuade you to help me. When you had gone, I saw that I had made a mistake. My principal mistake was to let you be mistaken—in me. I couldn't do it, Mr. Le-male! I decided to give it up. That was why I sent you the note before nine o'clock the next morning telling you to take no steps in the matter. I am sorry."

Instantly he was raging, not with wrath but with disappointed passion. His face was convulsed.

"And you think this makes it all right?" he demanded, his voice lowered as though he feared to give his feeling rein.

She drew away from him, her chin high.

"It would, with any gentleman," she retorted.

"Yes?" he returned with ugly sarcasm. "Any gentleman would think it all right if a woman, to get what she wanted, sent for him and egged him on and

played on his feelings and let him think what he wanted to think, and sent him out to work for her under the idea that there would be more of that sort of thing? And any gentleman, after turning the trick she desired, would think it all right if she got the information she wanted from somebody else and then told him to keep out of her sight? He would? Not much he would!"

She looked at him with ineffable disdain.

"Then it's useless to discuss it."

He answered through his teeth.

"You asked me to bring you," he said, "a white envelope sealed with wax, and marked with indelible pencil, 'D. C.' You reproached me for trying to bargain in advance! Well, here—" he took from his coat pocket a white envelope and laid it with a sharp, slapping noise face down on the table so that its flap, sealed with black wax, was visible, "—here's the thing you wanted. And I did *not* bargain in advance! I——"

He raised himself from his chair and, lunging forward, caught her hand with his.

"Do you remember," he demanded in a harsh undertone before she could recover herself, "saying I expected 'so much for so little done'? I've done a great deal, and I expect——"

She threw off his hand and sprang to her feet. She stood leaning against the wall near the window, a hand over her heart, struggling for breath. He was in

front of her, slightly bent toward her, the fingers of his right hand still crooked as if to close upon hers, his suffused eyes outraging her.

"You got the information you wanted from Vail!" he charged, jealously adding to his rage.

She moved her head weakly from side to side.

"No," she breathed. "No!"

She was sick, half fainting from disgust. Her knees gave under her so that she did not dare attempt to move. She had never had to deal with such a man.

He was beside himself.

"I know!" he insisted brutally, watching her, ready to lay hands on her if she stirred; his face was dead white! "I've known all along what he was doing. I've kept track of him! It suits you now to run with him instead of me. You can get more out of him than out of me. But I've got a say about that." He swallowed, twisting his head to one side as he did so. "I told you you made me crazy. You can't go that far and no farther. Not with me! You try it, you and he, and see what——"

He checked, and got himself in hand with tremendous effort, the shock of it crimsoning his face. His hands shook so that he folded his arms closely to control it. He tried to smile.

"But it's no use for us to quarrel," he said, with a return to the unnatural forcefulness she had observed in him when he entered the room. "I can help you when you need help. And you will need it!

You mean more to me than anything on earth. I love you! I want you. I want you so——”

“Don’t dare say another word to me!” she interrupted fiercely.

Her strength came back to her. She pushed herself forward from the wall with her hands against it, and stepped toward him.

“Listen to me!” she swept on, white with shame and anger. “I consented to see you this afternoon because I wanted to tell you as inoffensively as I could that your path and mine were not the same. I was then, and am now, bitterly ashamed of having so debased myself, of having, in my sore need, yielded to the temptation to use you. I knew you were the sort of thing that could be used—that way. And I lowered myself to it, thinking that any means was justified by the great end I sought. You have shown me the ugliness of that false belief. It was harder to do than I had anticipated, even though I had thought I knew you. It was impossible!”

She turned to pass to one side of him, but he caught her arm.

“Not so fast!” he said. “You’re in my power now. Rifling a safe, either with your own hand or by direction, isn’t a pretty thing to have told about you. You made me lying promises. You lied to me with your hints. With your eyes! With your body! Now I want what you promised. I want you as you meant me to think I——”

She broke from him and, running to the door, threw it open.

He was close behind her.

Standing in the doorway, her hand still on the knob, she turned and warned him: "If you say another word, I'll call Dr. Bonilla."

He caught her arm again and started to argue: "If you——"

She cried out, her voice high and clear: "Dr. Bonilla!"

Behind the door directly across the hall there was the sound of a man's footsteps.

Lemale dropped her arm, brushed past her and walked unhurriedly down the hall in the direction of the staircase.

Bonilla appeared in the doorway opposite and glanced first at her, then at the back of Lemale's head and shoulders sinking below the level of the hall floor as he descended the stairs.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing!" she replied, regretting that she had called him, and went over to him. "A business detail for which I thought I might need you, but mistakenly."

She linked her arm in his and, turning him about, walked back into his study beside him.

"The truth is," she continued, "I've just been taught a valuable lesson. I've learned that some places are No Man's Land to a decent woman, no mat-

ter how white and shining the goal may be on the far side of it."

The Minister looked puzzled.

"That's somewhat allegorical," he commented; "but its reasoning's distinctly sound."

Half an hour later Mr. Felton Wilmeth, weak and shaken by his railroad journey but aflame with the ardor of the volunteer sleuth, was in conference with Willoughby at police headquarters. His story had delighted the detective.

"Now the woman in black," Willoughby insisted; "you're sure you can't identify her?"

"I'm very sure," Wilmeth answered.

The detective flashed a newspaper clipping from a drawer of his desk.

"That look like her?" he asked, holding it before his visitor.

Wilmeth laughed.

"It's no use!" he said. "She had her veil on, and I didn't see her. Fact is, she didn't know I saw her. She was turning away from the door and away from me, her hand just leaving the knob, as I stepped through my door. She went down the corridor without ever knowing I was watching her."

"Damn!" Mr. Willoughby exclaimed. "That woman has the luck of a troop of devils! She's so slippery! We had her—at least, we had the woman I think she is—shadowed from here to Norfolk last

Thursday, from the Norfolk railroad station to the Norfolk water front that night, and if she didn't wind up by giving our man the slip, I'll eat my last year's hats! Made him sneak on to one motor boat that had just shoved off, and, as soon as he was aboard, she stepped off of that one on to another and got clean away! Luck? She lives on it!"

Mr. Wilmeth grinned.

"Another name for it," he ventured, "might be cleverness."

Willoughby grunted and drew four photographs from the desk drawer.

"All right," he said, with a snap-back to cheeriness. "Let's see which one of these was the fellow you saw on the fire-escape outside the Whiteur window. You're willing to swear to the man, aren't you?"

Wilmeth took the photographs.

"Sure," he answered. "I saw him in a strong light from the arc lamp less than twenty feet away."

CHAPTER XXI

HER LAST RESORT

Vail went to see Miss Domenza that evening. Although he had slight hope of persuading her to act on Willoughby's suggestion, he could not neglect this last opportunity to make her appreciate fully the danger in which she stood. He had not seen her since the night of the Bonillas' ball, and at that time his only conversation with her had been limited to their talk during the one dance she had given him, talk which had consisted mainly of his answers to her questions and left him uncertain what her attitude toward him would be. It would not have greatly surprised him if she had refused to see him when he called at the Legation at a few minutes past eight o'clock.

But she did see him. He waited for her in the first-floor room overlooking the garden, and, when she joined him there, he realized at once that she expected him to avoid personalities and to confine his communications to subjects relating to their work.

"I know you're surprised at this call," he said apologetically, "but I considered it necessary. I've come to talk to you, if I may, about certain developments that are far from trivial."

She smiled with the pleasure she would have shown

any of her friends. He still did not know where he stood with her.

"I am glad to see you, of course," she told him. "Close that window, won't you, please?"

He did so, and pulled down the shade. The weather had turned much warmer that afternoon, and an unusually close, oppressive evening was ushering in the hot spell that visits Washington every year in the latter days of May or the first part of June.

"The heat," he suggested, "is preferable to the possibility of a listener out there in the dark, isn't it?"

"Decidedly."

She had sat down and was slowly using a fan, a gorgeous thing of ivory and plumes, while he attended to the window and got another chair. She was thinking how much he had changed since she had last seen him. His features had a fine-drawn look; his lips were tighter set; he looked older than the buoyant, laughing young man-about-town who had come to her in that same room less than a week ago with his appeal that she leave Washington.

Her estimate of the change in him was not exaggerated. He had worried about her sudden trip out of town, at one time imagining her on a vain search for the ammunition ship, at another picturing her in danger after having discovered the boat. The possibility of Barrone's connecting her with the Whiteur case for his own ends, Willoughby's moves against her, his old problem of how to save her from danger

connected with the Santos plot—these fears and uncertainties had made a different man of the Carston Vail whom Washington had known, the shark at bridge whist, the squire of dames, the perfect dinner companion, the life of the party at his clubs. The laughter had gone out of him. His friends, on the rare occasions when they saw him, found him silent, at times morose.

“I had a talk with Willoughby this afternoon,” he explained. “He told me of his threat to arrest you to-morrow evening.”

She was entirely composed. In a dinner dress of light blue, she sat there as lovely, as untouched by disagreeable things, he thought, as he had ever seen her. If her eyes were shadowed by weariness, the effect of it was so slight as to leave him in doubt of it.

“Yes,” she commented without emotion. “He told me that.”

“He came to me,” Vail continued, “because, he said, he considered himself under obligation to me, and he wanted to give me a chance to be of assistance to you. Of course, he was playing his own game too.”

The lightest of smiles moved her lips. The lightest of irony was in her voice.

“Of course,” she agreed.

“But the point for us to consider,” he proceeded earnestly, “is his statement that you can save yourself from arrest. You can do it by telling what you

know about the person who is guilty, if you do know it."

"Meaning Alberto Barrone?"

"Yes," he urged her; "meaning Alberto Barrone."

"Mr. Vail," she replied, as earnest now as he, "I know no more than you do who killed that woman. I can't save myself by giving evidence against Mr. Barrone or against anybody else. . . . And another thing. I am not so foolish as to refuse help from you or from any source. I need it so badly. I need it particularly if this work we're engaged in is to succeed. But, as I've said before, there are reasons why I can't accept it from you unless you give it, solely and entirely, for the sake of the work."

He waved that aside in a sort of desperate impatience.

"I'm glad you understand the situation so clearly," he responded, his words clipped and sharp. "You're up against bigger things than you know. You've got to have help! You've no right to refuse it, no matter who offers it. As for me, I give what I can, with the understanding that, when it's given, no sequel to it is expected—or hoped for. I give it, knowing that, once done, it is done forever, walled up against the future, gone, forgotten!"

She reviewed that, a feather of the fan touching her lips.

"Tell me," she said finally; "can I count on help?"

Or are you talking in a desperate hope of our stumbling on a way out?"

He chose his words carefully.

"I can help you if anybody can," he replied. "That much is certain."

"Is it within the possibilities that you can postpone my arrest until Monday evening, giving me time to award the concessions and to send the signal to General Santos when Mr. Barfield acts?"

As she asked the question, the touch of indifference and remoteness that had been in her manner disappeared. Beginning to rely on him, she took no further pains to hide her real feelings; and, as her face mirrored her suspense and fear, he saw how incessant strain had devastated her also. There were shadows under her eyes as if they had been put there with broad strokes of a brush.

"Yes, it's possible," he assured her, "if you will give me something to go on, something to offer Willoughby."

"Something like incriminating Mr. Barrone, you mean?"

He nodded.

"Yes; or something like establishing your own innocence."

"My own innocence? Let me think."

A silence followed. She turned away from him, giving him a view of only a small part of her profile

over her left shoulder. Her posture was such that he could see her left hand holding the fan, which was now folded shut, her grasp upon it so tight that her knuckles stood out, white and hard like ivory.

He was suddenly aware that she was tremendously moved.

When she turned to him again, every vestige of color was gone from her face.

"I had no idea that you could hope to change the time of the arrest," she said.

"I don't say I can," he corrected. "I can if anybody can. I am your last resort."

Her eyes, light gray now, cold, small of pupil, met and held his, anxiously questioning, all through this dialogue.

"There is the initialed handkerchief," she reminded him.

"Yes," he assented, not yet following her thought.

"And the affidavit that I was on the fourth floor of the Wareham at the time of the murder."

"Yes," he assented again, and started. "You said 'the initialed handkerchief,' Miss Domenza. Was it your initial?"

Her head jerked, once.

"Yes," she said.

"But," he suggested, "Willoughby did not identify the faint fragrance it carried."

"No?"

He straightened, his back pressed hard against the

chair. Suspicion, like a lightning flash, struck into his mind.

"That handkerchief," he asked; "is it yours?"

Her expression did not change.

"It is," she admitted.

"And that identification? Were you on the fourth floor of the Wareham at that time?"

"I was," she admitted again.

He frowned, struggling with his amazement.

"But how was it possible? You were at the theater!"

She moved her hand, a gesture of indifference, as if this part of the affair mattered very little.

"The detective guessed it," she said. "I left the theater by the alley exit, and was back in my seat before the performance was over."

His glance fell from hers. He felt unbearably hot, and, without knowing it, fumbled for his handkerchief and passed it roughly over his face. She was motionless, watching him. Looking up, he thought he caught a wary, measuring look on her face, as if she estimated the effect of her words on him.

He tried to think. A roaring, the hammering of his own pulses, was in his ears. Little white flashes danced before his eyes. Her brief sentences reassembled themselves, without his volition, at the portals of his brain. The facts they had conveyed marshaled themselves in front of him, took the places of the white flashes, hung black between her eyes and

his. They were like an advancing army, hostile, closing in upon him faster and faster. They surrounded him, besieged him, and beat like battering rams against the doors of his understanding.

He shook himself, trying to pull together, and discovered that he had put his hand to his throat, fingers between his collar and his dripping flesh. He jerked it away, slumped in the chair. His head hung forward, but not so much that he could not, by straining his eyes upward, see her face. It looked queer to him at first, the features all running together without form or distinctness. He squinted, stared, striving with terrific effort to see her clearly, and at last succeeded.

She sat still at a statue, and as silent.

With instantaneous clarity the truth was upon him! It constructed itself before him, piece by piece, link by link, with astonishing swiftness, a series of mental pictures.

It was her handkerchief! She was in the hotel! On the fourth floor! In the murder room! She had slipped out of the theater, done what she wanted, slipped back again, her alibi accomplished! Cleverly accomplished! And she confessed all these damning things, confessed them calmly, with neither shame nor embarrassment!

He flinched, like a man trying to avoid inevitable pain, and looked at her, this time with eyes that took knowledge of what they saw. There was no fear in

her face, no distress even! It was a mask of patience, of forbearance, of waiting! That astounded him. Waiting? Waiting for what?

When he tried to speak, his hand went again to his throat. He felt that speech was impossible. He tried once more.

"You," he said, in a whisper, "you were—" His hand dropped away from his throat, and immediately his voice cleared. "You were in Miss Whiteur's room that night!"

"Yes," she answered, it seemed to him with the same waiting quality in her voice that he had seen in her face.

He got to his feet like a drunken man and put a hand heavily on her left shoulder, keeping it there though he felt the soft, warm flesh give under the weight of it. She leaned a little to one side and looked up at him. Doubt possessed him like an illness. Doubt of her!

He bent lower, hung over her more closely, as though he peered into some dark, curious place. Her eyes were opened wide, bigger than he had ever seen them, a clear, light gray. He had the fleeting thought that they were mirrors, immense mirrors, which reflected something to conceal something else.

The idea tortured him. He felt that flames licked up his spine and broke into little tongues at the base of his brain and back of his eyes. He put up his free hand to brush away things that interfered with

his vision, and at once he could see through the mirrors, deep down under them, to the truth that gave them light! He looked a long time, peering and holding her still, bent back a little by the weight of his grasp.

"But you," he said at last in unspeakable relief, "you had nothing to do with *that*—her death!"

He slowly lifted his hand from her shoulder and stepped back. As he did so, his legs were so weak that he dropped into his chair, shaking, pallid, breathing in gasps that seemed to tear his chest asunder.

She sat up straight and put her hands to her hair, which his roughness had disordered. She regarded him with brows slightly lifted, speculation in her look.

"Why don't you say something?" he demanded.

"I have said nothing," she replied, "because it was my right that you should perceive my innocence without persuasion from me."

As suddenly as the storm of feeling had come upon him, the last remnants of it left him. His mind worked with its accustomed clearness. He had now not the remotest doubt of her innocence. But precautions were necessary. The word was in his mind like the tolling of a bell: "Precautions! Precautions!"

He attacked the problem of how he could assist her. He seemed impersonal, judicial, like a lawyer with a client.

"If my help is to be efficient," he told her, "you will have to tell me more."

"What do you want to know?" she retorted.

She, too, appeared impersonal, business-like. Her self-control was unbelievable. She seemed to have succeeded in blinding herself to her own imminent danger in order to see more clearly what could be done for the success of the undertaking that was, above all things, dear to her heart.

"First," he asked, "how long were you in Miss Whiteur's room? And at what time?"

She answered without hesitation.

"Two or three minutes, I think. Certainly not more than three. I was there just after she had been killed, immediately after, I realize now."

It required unusual effort for him to frame the next query.

"Who else was there?"

"Nobody."

"You saw nobody there, and nobody saw you?"

"That is true."

"Why were you there?"

She smiled pathetically.

"I can't tell you that," she said.

He tried to help her with it.

"But," he suggested, "it might have been accidental. You might have gone into the wrong room."

She shook her head.

"No. I went there deliberately."

"Did you wish her death? Want her out of the way?"

"No!" she denied sharply, and added: "But it was to my advantage, to the advantage of Saragonda, that she was out of the way."

"Did you know her personally?"

"No."

A feeling of helplessness knit his brows.

"What else can you tell me?" he urged.

She thought.

"I don't believe there is anything else," she decided. "I'm sorry, but it's all that I can tell anybody."

"But don't you see," he pleaded, "that what you've told me is worse than nothing unless you add to it? I can go to Willoughby and say: 'You were right. Miss Domenza left the theater and went to the Wareham. She is the mysterious woman in black. That was her handkerchief. Your witness did see her near the murder room. In fact, she was in that room for two or three minutes after the murder had been done. But she's innocent. She didn't even know Miss Whiteur!' And, when I've said that, he'll reply: 'Yes; I can prove she was there. Let her prove her innocence!'"

"I see," she said wearily. "And I can't prove it."

"Then," he concluded, "there's only one thing to do: keep quiet about it. Confess nothing. And let me see

what can be done between now and eight o'clock to-morrow evening."

When he had gone, she sat a long time gazing at the opposite wall. At first her face reflected nothing but concentrated thought. Then gradually sadness changed it, and regret came into it. It was as if unseen but irresistible fingers manipulated and remolded her features. Her whole countenance was at last convulsed. She put up both her hands and sobbed, tears stealing through her fingers.

"Oh, he believes me!" she said to herself again and again. "He believes me! Why, why does he believe me?"

And, with that catechism of bitterness in her mind, she wept uncontrollably.

An hour and a half later she was called to the telephone, and at once recognized the voice as Vail's.

"Listen to this attentively, please," he said. "It is of vital importance. You remember the document a friend of ours expected to receive from Saragonda Monday? The document that was to enable you to communicate with your friend down there?"

"Yes," she replied, excited by the relief in his voice.

"Well," he continued, "it's come! Came to-night. Our friend has it, and it's what we wanted. We're all to meet to-morrow noon at the usual place."

"Thank you," she said, her heart pounding hard.
"Thank God!"

This was just about the time when Paul Menes, having climbed into a taxicab at the Union Station, was directing the chauffeur:

"The Wareham hotel!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE INSULT

Outside was the quiet and stillness of a typical, blazing hot Sunday forenoon in Washington. In the office of the Q Street house Forney, Vail and Barrone were waiting for the closing deal in their big undertaking.

"Proud and promising prophets!" exclaimed Forney, the least nervous of the three. "The thing hardly seems possible. Four men and a woman meet in this house in less than an hour, and, presto! a ship loaded with instruments of death is sent on her way. A sentence flashes along the bottom of the sea, and thousands of men go out to fight and kill! A government is overturned! A new ruler created! And men with money amass new millions. A great game, men! Big stuff!"

Barrone consulted his watch and jabbed it back into the pocket at his belt. For once, his impenetrable calm had deserted him. He was pacing up and down the length of the office, smoking continuously, lighting fresh cigarettes from the stubs of the old. Like the others, he had taken off his coat and draped it over the back of a chair.

"Where's von Palz?" he asked shortly, without commenting on his associate's exultant outburst.

"He'll be here in a few minutes," Forney informed him. "He waited at the hotel, hoping to get a long-distance connection with somebody in New York."

Barrone blew out a cloud of smoke.

"It's a quarter past eleven now," he said petulantly. "I'll feel better when it's half-past twelve and all this business settled and done!"

Vail, lounging in Lemale's chair with his feet on the desk, looked at him without amiability. His dislike of the man had grown in proportion to his own devotion to Margarita Domenza, and had reached its culmination at Willoughby's account of Barrone's underhanded attack on her.

The Saragondan turned on him and grumbled:

"At any rate, you're serene enough!"

"Why shouldn't I be?" Vail returned, though his appearance and condition palpably belied his words; every nerve in his body was throbbing.

Barrone gave his grating laugh.

"Why shouldn't you be? Yes. And why shouldn't I be? I confess I don't know. The thing's in our hands now. You've got Barfield's promise of the Government's recognition of Santos. Forney's here with the money. Miss Domenza will bring the concessions. It's done. Practically. But somehow I'm uneasy. This Whiteur business is on my nerves, I guess!" He lit another cigarette, grinding the stub

of the last one into an ash tray. "Not that I take his threat of arrest seriously. That's child's play. The quintessence of stupidity." His laugh had a jeer in it. "He knows he hasn't a leg to stand on, and he'll never go through with it. If he should, pfui! He'll simply have the pleasure of apologizing."

Vail, impressed by his nervousness, was thinking: "Is he overtalking, to whistle his courage up?"

Aloud he said: "I'm like you, Barrone; far from sure he'll go through with it. I'm to have a conference with him about it at four this afternoon."

Barrone snapped his fingers.

"If it hadn't been for this Domenza woman's folly," he declared savagely, "we'd never have been brought into the mess!"

Vail flared up at that.

"She's not to blame," he contradicted, giving him a cool, level look.

"No?" Barrone retorted disagreeably. "You know, Carston, you yourself haven't been the help to this work for the past week that we had a right to expect. All because of your concern for her. Instead of working with me, damned if you haven't spent your time running her errands and fending for her! You might as well have been in love with her."

His words and demeanor expressed not so much a displeasure with Vail as resentment against Miss Domenza; he was voicing the rage which her independence of him had provoked for the past six days.

"You won't say that again," Vail warned, dropping his feet from the desk to the floor.

Barrone shrugged.

"No, I won't," he agreed; "because you wouldn't be so foolish, with a woman like her."

Vail stood up.

"A woman like her?" he repeated, his eyes flashing. Forney took the rôle of peace-maker.

"Shuddering saints!" he interposed. "This is no time for schoolboy fireworks, men! Cut it! This check in my——"

"Just a moment, Forney," Vail's voice stopped him.

"Oh, there's no need of these dramatics," Barrone said with a careless laugh. "If you don't know it, Carston, I'm doing you a favor in telling you. I happen to know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that this Margarita Domenza did the fine work necessary to get a shipload of arms out of Paris to Honduras eighteen months ago. I know how she turned the trick. All Paris knew it at the time. It was the gossip of the cafés and boulevards. She did it by getting the favor of the Cabinet Minister concerned. He maintained an apartment for her just off the Rue de Rivoli, on——"

"You know that, do you?" Vail interrupted, his words the more deadly because of their cold deliberateness.

"I do," Barrone asserted, leaning an elbow on the iron safe.

"Every word of it?"

"Every word."

"Then you're going to take back every word of it, the cowardly lie!" Vail said, and, with an instantaneous tightening of his muscles, sprang, quick as a panther, at Barrone and caught him by the collar with his right hand.

The Saragondan came of a race which regards fist fights as things that are not done. He still failed to realize the intensity of his assailant's fury.

"Don't be a fool, Carston!" he expostulated, his fingers pulling futilely at the hand on his collar.

Vail bent him backward over the safe.

"You'll be the fool," he said, "if you don't apologize for that insult and admit every syllable of it a lie!"

Barrone's face was crimson.

"I can't," he objected, speaking with difficulty. "It's true, and you ought to know it."

Forney took hold of Vail's right arm to free Barrone's throat, and was hurled to one side. Vail, at the repetition of the insult, had gone berserker. He was shaking the Saragondan as a dog shakes a rat.

But Barrone was no coward. He ducked down and to one side, breaking Vail's hold, and struck him a glancing blow on the side of his head. Vail, rising on his toes to put all his weight into the return blow, drew back his right hand, and again Forney caught his arm.

It was at this moment that they heard Margarita

Domenza's voice. Standing just within the open doorway, she said:

"Gentlemen! Do I intrude?"

The words, spoken in her usual conversational tone, stopped them dead. For a moment, like men petrified, they held the postures which they had had when she entered: Barrone crouching forward with arm up to ward off the expected blow, Vail with fist drawn back, and Forney clinging to his elbow.

Vail was the first to move, freeing his arm and bowing to Margarita. Barrone straightened up, fumbling his cravat, his swarthy face a greenish white, and also bowed. Forney spun around and, open-mouthed, stared at her.

"I came in," she explained, ignoring the scene she had interrupted, "when nobody answered my ring. I supposed the servants had been given the morning off. If I may, I should like a few minutes with Mr. Vail, alone."

Barrone, with a murmured word of acquiescence, reached for his coat and left the room. Forney followed suit.

Vail, gasping for breath and with hair disheveled, struggled into his coat and drew out Barrone's swivel chair for her. He stood, waiting for what she had to say. His left temple had a red welt across it, the line followed by one of Barrone's glancing knuckles.

"Less than an hour from now," she said, standing so close to him that he could have reached out and

taken her hand, "I shall have passed out of your life forever; and you will not regret it."

He answered her with a confident smile.

"That," he declared, and paused for breath, "that is out of the question."

She sat down and looked up to him with eyes that were infinitely sad.

"You're wrong," she contradicted gently. "But because what you are to learn about me will be so shocking to you, it is my woman's wish to soften it as best I may. I want you to hear from my lips how I have—have made use of you perhaps. I want you to see that, though circumstances were too big for me, I did try to combat them."

CHAPTER XXIII

"THE KIND OF A WOMAN I AM"

"I know you," he objected in gentle obduracy.

Barrone's recital of the Paris incident recurred to him, but he gave it no weight. He exulted, in that moment, in his inability to believe evil in her. He had said he knew her. He still knew her!

"You can't change yourself," he insisted. "You can't make an ugly thing out of sheer beauty and wonder!"

"It's because I want you to understand the truth," she explained, her unwavering eyes meeting his, "that you must know me as I am. I have used you deceitfully when you most trusted and helped me. The night you found me there at that safe I held in my hand the envelope I had come to get."

She put forth her hand and touched the beaded bag she had laid on the desk.

"The envelope is in this bag now. In the darkness that lasted from the time I put out my electric torch until you turned on the lights, I took a pencil from this desk and marked the envelope for later identification. You thought, when I left this room then, that you had saved me from rifling the safe. As a matter

of fact, I had paved the way for the theft. In the moment that you did most for me, I was less than worthy of it."

He waited for her to go on. His expression, an unshadowed confidence in her, was unaltered.

Her hands were clasping and unclasping in her lap on a heavy ruler she had taken from the desk.

"You told me a few days ago," she said, with a smile that was pathetic because of its bravery, "that you knew I was 'not like other women who mix up in these international plots.' You said that they stole men's secrets from them by infatuating them, that they employed vile devices and engineered vile temptations, and that I was above such work. But, to get this envelope, I undertook to infatuate a man, a base and degraded man. I assailed him with 'vile devices' and 'vile temptations.' I appealed to him in the only ways that could be effective with a creature like him. I—" She broke off and shuddered, drooping lids for an instant veiling her eyes. "Oh, you must see!"

He remembered Barrone's suspicion of Lemale's having tampered with the safe. A picture of the man's animal and passion-bitten face rose before him. He guessed the truth.

"But in the end," he suggested with an eagerness he could not repress, "you couldn't go on with it! Isn't it so? The price was too high for even your fine purpose. Wasn't it? Tell me."

Something about him, his immunity to suspicion,

the quality of his trust, made her afraid; she feared her own weakness.

"Oh, you still believe in me!" she exclaimed in a gust of passion that he did not understand. "But those are mere details, these things that I have just told you to prove to you, once and for all, that I am not what you think me. The main thing is that you have given me such friendship as rarely blesses a woman in——"

"Friendship?" he interrupted, giving the word a new and surprising color.

"And I've used it—abominably!" she swept on, hating herself. "And now you're about to suffer for it—horribly! I've been weak when I should have been strong; and you—" she struck the desk with both her hands still clenched on the ruler, "—you pay for it! I told you last Monday morning, when you asked me to let you take all the risks and do all the work— You didn't know what you were asking!— I told you then I was in this work because I loved the thrill of the game. I said I wanted the romance of adventure, the dice of life in my hands. And I——"

She paused at the sound of von Palz's voice in the hall, calling apparently to someone upstairs:

"Why can't I tell him we're waiting?"

Vail waved it aside.

"They can wait," he said.

She dropped the ruler and, grasping the edge of the desk with her hands wide apart, sat more erect, an air of pride about her.

"But that wasn't the truth," she declared. "The truth was that I belonged, and do belong, to Saragonda, and that I came here solely for the purpose of serving my own country. I had taken an oath to do this work here, not for any man or set of men, but for Saragonda and her people. I love them in a way that you probably don't understand. My brother taught me to love them, to pity them and to love them. He taught me their history, told me their woes and their burdens. It was a religion with me. It is now. He made it a part of my soul that to be able to help them and yet refuse, was the one unpardonable sin."

"I can understand that." He interpolated the comment quickly, making it an encouragement.

"Yes, I dare say," she acknowledged; "but you don't know them as I know them, as he and I know them. Not in the few cities they have built, but back in the interior. They are bound down by ignorance. They live, back there behind the mountain ranges, all through that section where the rubber territory lies, they live like animals! They are clothed in rags or not at all. Grass and weeds grow in the streets of their villages. Old and young, particularly the young, the babies, die like flies from disease and filth."

Her voice broke. Her eyes were misty. In the intensity of her feeling she was gazing upon those people's sufferings, bandaging their wounds.

"Disease and poverty stifling them, killing them,

while all around them flowers bud and burst into flaming loveliness overnight, and wealth is to be had for the stretching forth of a hand and taking it! They know nothing, hope for nothing. Their babies inherit sorrows and despairs! Rascals and thieves, calling themselves rulers, have for years robbed them and killed them, giving them nothing in return. And the opportunity came to me to do a big thing for them! The opportunity to assure them eventually a stable government, schools, hospitals, medicines, and nursing, and commerce, industries, towns with the weeds crushed out by the feet of traders, money and self-respect! And I seized it. I said to myself: 'At last! At last! I, a mere woman, can contribute something to the adornment of their destiny! God give me the strength and the wit and the courage to succeed!' And I——"

"There was the real you, splendid!" he interrupted.

The ardor with which she spoke had opened his eyes to what she saw.

"I would have sacrificed myself," she said; "in any way, to any degree. I have sacrificed myself. But I have sacrificed you too! You are going from this room to be sacrificed."

He had not the slightest idea what she meant. He was, in fact, so held and dominated by what she had been saying that he felt the present impossibility of reasoning out what she predicted.

Her enthusiasm disappeared. Her shoulders sagged.

"I succeed and you go under," she lamented bitterly. "If I had tried to warn you, if I had tried to show you the way out, I should have failed. You stood between what I had to do and——"

He reached across the desk and caught her hand, to calm her.

"I don't see what you mean," he interrupted gently. "What do you mean by saying you sacrificed me?"

"You will see in a moment," she replied, unconscious of the clasp of his hand, or uncaring. "And you'll see, I hope, that if I could have prevented it, I would have. Oh," she said desperately, "I have agonized over it so! It has given me, and will give me, unmeasured sorrow, unending regret. And all because you have been so fine to me, so devoted to my safety!"

She smiled, her lips twisted.

"You planning for my safety when everything I did, everything I said, made your ruin surer! But you will know, you must know, I didn't wantonly trample on what you gave me. You will remember that, so far as I could, I warned you, you who were too fine to know what the warning meant! And after I knew how much you gave me, I stopped, stopped exploiting your trust, stopped using your heart, your very heart!"

He bent closer to her, a happy light in his eyes.

"You care that much?" he asked. "Now?"

She smiled, this time in a sadness without bitterness.

"I tried to keep you from believing in me," she reminded him.

"But you care now, so much?" he repeated.

"Say, rather," she answered in a fluttering whisper, "I might have—cared."

His heart was lifted up.

"What is it you fear for me? What do you think you have done to me?"

She drew her hand from his and picked up the ruler.

"I have betrayed you," she said, and looked up to him with fear in her eyes.

He looked at her in astonishment, unbelief.

"Betrayed me! When you love Saragonda so? Impossible!"

"I have told you," she insisted, and stopped to shut her mouth against a moan. "It is because I love Saragonda that I have done it."

Some suspicion of the truth broke upon him at last. A look came into his face that she could make nothing of. There was fear in it, wonder, and an unbelief that persisted.

"You mean——"

He checked, and spun on his heel to face the door which had been flung violently open. Von Palz stood in the doorway.

"Pardon, Miss Domenza," the German explained, "but Mr. Barrone asked me to say we're waiting for you."

"In a moment, von Palz!" he said curtly, and turned to Margarita, his back to von Palz, a notice of dismissal.

"No," she objected, a finality in her voice which was audible to both men; "we will go up now."

The effort she made to say that was so great that it seemed to rob her of her femininity. She was all strength. Vail, looking at her, thought of a stone wall from which a vine in full bloom has just been torn. She picked up the beaded bag and looked about her, as if to fix in her mind every detail of this room in which she had suffered and inflicted pain.

Vail bowed and waited for her to precede him.

She went to the door and passed through, pale but calm, unmoved, a personality from whom power emanated like a tangible thing.

Von Palz, before following her, stepped to the front door to see that it was latched. Vail ascended the stairs behind them, afraid not for himself but for her. He was thinking: "It's inconceivable! She didn't mean that."

At the moment that Miss Domenza walked into the lounge on the second floor of the Q Street house, Carlos Lemale, who had been to the Legation in search of her, walked down Eighteenth Street. A short distance before he reached Q, Eugene Willoughby, who had been waiting at the corner, screened from observation from Barrone's house, went up to meet him.

"You're early," the detective greeted him, "but I don't suppose that matters."

Lemale was agitated. His eyes had a wild look. He was constantly gnawing his under lip. His hands, when they were not jammed into his coat pockets, twitched in all their muscles.

"How long will this thing take?" he asked sullenly.

"Not over a few minutes," Willoughby replied. "You identify the two papers I'm interested in as being in Barrone's handwriting, and I'll do the rest. It won't make you mad, will it, to do that to the man who fired you last night?"

Lemale swore viciously.

"I told him I'd get him," he said, and swore again. "And he's not the only one!"

Willoughby looked at him attentively.

"No funny business!" he cautioned. "All you do is identify the papers."

Lemale made no reply to the warning.

"That woman's in the house with them now," he informed the detective, and, as he did so, hunched his shoulders together, like a man struggling against shivering in bitter cold.

Willoughby, studying him covertly, gave the word to move.

They went down Q Street to Barrone's house and up the steps to the front door, taking care to make no noise. Lemale, who had kept his latch key, inserted it in the lock.

"Easy now," Willoughby cautioned.

They went in, and the detective, drawing the door almost shut behind them, led the way silently into the drawing-room.

Three minutes later Paul Menes came down the street and, entering the house quietly, tiptoed, unseen by Lemale, into the office. Willoughby had seen to it that Lemale faced toward the back of the house when Menes made his unobtrusive entrance.

CHAPTER XXIV

ON THE SECOND FLOOR

As Miss Domenza entered the lounge, Barrone and Forney rose to their feet on the far side of the long table, the latter betraying the excitement of elated anticipation, Barrone outwardly calm, his clothing readjusted and impeccable, without a sign of Vail's assault upon him. Only his opaque eyes and protruding lower jaw indicated the ugliness of his mood.

Von Palz had been affected by the solemnity of the two whose conference he had interrupted downstairs. He had entered the house well satisfied, looking forward, like Forney, to the immediate success of their plot, but now he was uneasy, his keen little eyes darting from one to another of his companions. Margarita, composed and alert, went forward to a chair opposite Forney and near the front window at that end of the room.

Von Palz took his accustomed place beside Forney and Barrone, while Vail was on Miss Domenza's left, his chair at such an angle that he could face the three men and at the same time observe her.

A short and awkward pause ensued.

There was an atmosphere of strain and discomfort, none of the gratulatory and laughing confidence

usually characterizing people about to take the final step in the consummation of a great undertaking.

Forney, with an explosive laugh, tried to dissipate the air of unpleasantness.

"Mr. Chairman," he said, turning to Barrone, "I move that, as a favor to the rest of us and before we get down to the big business ahead, Miss Domenza tell us whether her mother—" he tried to imitate the clever accent she had given the word in their first conference, "—is really her mother and deaf and dumb."

His ludicrous manner of saying the thing brought smiles from all of them and a guffaw from the Count, putting them on a more bearable footing. In her heart Margarita blessed Forney.

"It's a fair request," she replied, "and easily complied with. She is my mother, and she's not deaf and dumb. She had to pretend to be because, not being able to speak French, it was the only way she could live up to the pretense that we were Parisians. I thought it safer, though, to keep it a secret until now."

Barrone, whose smile had been thinnest, brought them back to the business in hand.

"Mr. Vail," he said, looking him in the eyes with no sign of hostility, "I believe your matter comes first."

Miss Domenza looked at Vail. The men settled themselves in their chairs, and at once their faces wore grave, absorbed expressions. For the moment the

grinding suspense that had oppressed them for weeks had hold of them again.

Vail's voice was hoarse.

"Yes," he assented, and took a folded paper from a wallet he had carried in his hip pocket. "I am authorized to read this to you and to show it to you." He unfolded the paper, his hands trembling. "But it cannot go out of my possession. It is signed 'Francis I. Barfield,' and it says: 'Convinced by American agents' accounts of the deplorable conditions prevailing under the Lestrada Government in Saragonda, the Government of the United States is resolved to recognize as the real Government of that country General Sotero Santos and his agents when General Santos shall have demonstrated, by a decisive defeat of the Lestrada forces in battle, his ability and power to assume control of Saragonda.' "

Exultation, like a gleam of sunshine through the clouds of a wintry sky, touched Barrone's hard-set face. Forney and von Palz were grinning. Miss Domenza exchanged glances with them and smiled. Vail, serious and watchful, keeping his hand on the paper, went from one to the other to allow them to read it and see the signature.

Forney did not wait for a word from Barrone.

"Now it's my turn, I guess," he announced, and, with a theatric flourish, produced a wallet from which he took a check. "Here's the stuff from our New York people. As agreed on the first payment, this

certified check is for a hundred and forty-five thousand dollars."

He held it up for their inspection and handed it to Barrone.

A rustle of excitement passed through the group.

"Now, Miss Domenza," Barrone prompted, the check lying face up on the table under his hands.

She opened the beaded bag in her lap and took from it two long, bulky envelopes unsealed.

"These," she explained, handing Barrone three documents typewritten on legal-cap paper, "are three copies of General Santos' concession to Mr. Forney and Count von Palz, as representatives and agents of the New York capitalists, of all rights, title and privileges in the rubber lands of Saragonda. These—" she extracted two papers from the second envelope, "—are the original and carbon of his appointment of you, Mr. Barrone, as his Minister of the Interior with authority to administer the rubber and certain other concessions."

"Thank you," Barrone replied, holding the documents in a hand not quite steady. "Everybody understands, I believe, the amount of Mr. Vail's share in this first payment and his future reward."

They nodded affirmation of that.

"Now, gentlemen, please," Miss Domenza directed, "let me have your receipts for these papers. You will find there, Mr. Barrone, two copies of an acknowledgment of their safe delivery. It requires the signatures of Count von Palz, Mr. Forney and yourself."

Vail went to the other side of the table and, with Forney and the German, bent over Barrone's shoulder to read the concessions. The only sound in the room was the crackling of the stiff paper in the Saragondan's hand.

Miss Domenza left her place and stepped to the open window, looking down into Q Street. Automobiles were whizzing past, crowded with Sunday parties bound for the country districts. Directly opposite Barrone's house a large covered van with side, back and front curtains down, was drawn up against the curb. The front door of the house before which it stood was open. The driver of the van stood beside his conveyance, scowling in the blistering sunshine, like a man resentful of being delayed in his work in such uncomfortable surroundings.

Each of the three men concerned pocketed his copy of the concession.

Miss Domenza turned and saw that they were signing the receipts. She turned back to the window and, idly fingering the cord of the shade, swung its tassel back and forth. At that moment the driver of the van lifted his hat to nobody in particular, and, springing to the rear of his car, began to unfasten the curtain.

She left the window and stood near her chair.

"Here are the receipts, Miss Domenza," Barrone said, and leaned across the table and put them in her hands.

As he did so, the sound of many feet pounding on

the front stairs of his house came up through the open windows. The front door was no obstacle to the six men who, in citizens' clothes, had piled out of the curtained van and rushed the house. The plotters were still looking at each other with that brow-lifted, puzzled expression which heralds a sudden and sickening alarm, when the intruders came thumping up the inside stairs.

Miss Domenza, very pale, with her back to the wall near the window, had thrust the signed receipts into the neck of her dress.

"Gentlemen," she informed them, in her clear, steady voice, "now that the evidence is in my hands, you're about to be arrested."

On the word the door to the lounge crashed open, and six plain-clothes men of the Washington police force crowded in.

"Before this goes any further, Captain Sullivan," Miss Domenza addressed their leader, a suggestion of sadness in her words despite their tone of command, "I want to restore to Mr. Barrone a piece of his property."

She stepped forward and laid on the table in front of Barrone the sealed envelope which Lemale had brought her.

"You will see," she added to the Saragondan, "that it is still unopened."

Barrone, cat-like in the tense wariness of his pose, disregarded her. He was looking past her at the man

she had called "Captain Sullivan." Forney and von Palz, white as ghosts, their mouths open, looked helplessly from Miss Domenza to Barrone. Vail, as watchful as Barrone but not bewildered, kept his eye on Margarita.

"What does this tomfoolery mean?" Barrone demanded angrily.

"You're under arrest!" the captain, a tall man with massive neck and shoulders, answered sternly. "You and the three men with you. Charged with conspiring against a foreign Government. Here are the warrants. It's all in order and——"

He was interrupted by the entrance of Willoughby and Paul Menes with Carlos Lemale between them. His squad had swept past them downstairs.

"What're you up to, Sullivan?" Willoughby asked hotly. "What're you butting in here for?"

Miss Domenza answered the question.

"I'm responsible for that, Mr. Willoughby," she said. "I asked your chief to have the warrants served."

Forney began to jabber: "There's something wrong here! It's a mistake, I tell you! You've got the wrong——"

Willoughby shut him up.

"I came here to arrest a murderer," he told Sullivan sharply; "and I'm going through with it. Now! Here's the man who can tell us something we've got to know."

He pushed forward Paul Menes, who was staring at Margarita Domenza. He was a small, dark man, straight and thin, with swift, darting gestures and a piercing eye.

"Ah!" he said with a fierce sarcasm, still looking at Margarita. "Miss Dolores Carresca, Lestrada's agent! How do you do?"

CHAPTER XXV

"YOU HAVE THE TRUTH"

Von Palz dropped back into his chair with a thump like the dropping of a sack of flour. Barrone, his face a greenish white, hung forward over the table as if he would pull her answer from her throat with his hands.

She looked at him as she replied to Menes' greeting. A red spot glowed in each of her cheeks, but, save that she spoke a little fast, she had herself in hand. Although she did not once look at Vail, he got the impression that she spoke for his enlightenment.

"You have the truth," she said on a note of contempt. "I am Dolores Carresca, sister of Colonel Felipe Carresca, who's on the staff of General Lestrada, President of Saragonda. I had the opportunity to do this work, to detect these plotters, to save Saragonda from a mortal blow at the very time when, thanks to General Lestrada's ability and devotion, her people could hope for good government and better conditions. And I accepted it, although I had never done such work. This man, Mr. Menes, a Santos sympathizer, was a guest in my home in the interior of Saragonda, and a chance word he heard made him suspect that I was going to work for President Les-

trada. Fortunately, he thought my mission would take me to Europe."

Willoughby's eyes sparkled. Self-approval took the place of his anger.

"Then," he put in eagerly, "Miss Do— Miss Carresca, I was right about your following Miss Whiteur to this country! Wasn't I?"

"Yes," she replied; "you were entirely right. I followed her to this country by way of New Orleans, and from here to New York."

Barrone, the color slowly coming back to his face, tried to assert himself.

"This chatter may be intensely interesting," he said to Sullivan sarcastically; "but I don't propose to stand here and be bored with it!"

"You'll stand there until we take you to headquarters!" Sullivan warned him. "We want the truth of this thing, and this lady here can give it to us."

Barrone, looking far from bored, resumed his seat.

"That's what we've got to know, Miss Do—Carresca," Willoughby explained. "Just how did you put it over on these people?"

"I had confederates," she answered, weariness in her tone, "and superiors. It was really quite simple. Miss Whiteur was the real Margarita Domenza. She traveled under the name of Whiteur, for safety's sake. Her baggage was rifled in her hotel room in New York Thursday night, as they had planned before I left Olua. They brought me her papers, everything I needed to

enable me to impersonate her the following Sunday evening, the time set for her to meet these men in this room."

She was not looking at Vail, but she knew that, as she finished the last sentence, he started. He had seen that she was giving them a basis for the charge that she had murdered the Whiteur woman. She had already established a motive.

Willoughby saw it too, and acted on it.

"Then," he asked, "why did you follow her into the Wareham the Monday evening she got to this city? And why did you go into her room?"

"She doesn't have to answer that now!" Vail cut in quickly. "She's entitled to counsel."

Her eyes still met Willoughby's.

"I want to answer it now," she declared, the weariness of her tone more pronounced.

The one woman among all those men in the crowded room, she was the dominating figure, standing in a cleared space which they had instinctively given her. She held her head high, her hands hanging loosely clasped, thoroughly composed. So far as appearances went, she might have been in the drawing-room of her own home, a little tired from the unavoidable recital of events which she found it disagreeable to dwell on.

"She had delayed her coming to Washington a full day," she continued, "in the desperate hope that her stolen property would be recovered. I had already taken her place with the men she was to see here—

these gentlemen. But our operative in New York had missed the concession documents when he searched her baggage. I had to have them. They were what she relied on to identify her to Mr. Barrone and Mr. Vail when she tried to 'phone them from the Wareham. I had to have them, or fail. And, when I thought I had seen her go to the lobby in the elevator, I slipped into her room. I had a pass key. And I—" She hesitated, and concluded: "I got the documents from a secret pocket in her suitcase."

Barrone shot forward in his chair and struck the table with his fist.

"Then you did kill her!" he charged.

For all the heed she gave him, he did not exist.

"I got them," she went on with her statement, a faint frown of repugnance marking her forehead, "because she was dead when I entered the room."

"And you searched that suitcase while she lay dead beside you?" Willoughby's voice had an admiring awe in it.

"What else could I do?" she retorted. "Saragonda's future hung on my finding what I had gone there to get."

"But," he persisted, "suppose she had been alive when you went in?"

She dropped her hands apart, a move indicating the futility of his question.

Willoughby's manner changed abruptly from curiosity to sternness.

"But that's not the whole story!" he said in a ringing tone, and put a hand on Menes' arm, pulling him farther into the room. "Is it, Mr. Menes?"

While making the inquiry, he moved away from the man he addressed and put his back to the door.

"No," Menes replied, and, raising his arm, pointed at Lemale who stood to the right of Willoughby. "This Carlos Lemale is the black traitor in this crowd! He sold out a former employer to the Whiteur woman, the real Domenza, in another deal two years ago, sold out to her because she played on his sordid passions and made a fool as well as a crook of him!"

"Don't you see," Willoughby appealed to Dolores Carresca, "that, when she 'phoned to this house at half-past nine last Monday night, either he recognized her voice or she identified herself to him? Don't you see that he went at once to the Wareham, and, for revenge or because she repulsed his advances, killed her? Felton Wilmeth saw him standing on the fire-escape outside her room at a few minutes before eleven o'clock. He had killed her then! He——"

"I see!" she interrupted, the weariness no longer in her voice. "I do see it!"

Lemale was grinning in derision.

But Willoughby's words had given her a vision of how the thing had happened. It came on the heels of her memory of Carlos Lemale as he had looked the afternoon before when, as she leaned weak and nearly fainting against the wall in the room opposite

Dr. Bonilla's study, he crouched in front of her ready to lay hands on her if she moved. His face, the flaming eyes, the wet lip pulled back from his teeth, the meaning of his look—that picture gave her the key to the scene she had not witnessed.

"He went up to her room," she denounced him, her scornful gaze upon him, "by the stairs from the F Street entrance. He had made the appointment with her earlier than he has pretended since. Nobody saw him go up. She admitted him. And, when she repulsed him, when she threw him off, disgusted by his words and his touch, he tried to force her—he became a madman and killed her! Killed her! Then, knowing he hadn't been seen in the hotel, he calculated his chances with the cunning that creatures such as he possess. He left the room by the fire-escape, went down the escape, dropped into the alley and, ten or fifteen minutes later, walked around to the main entrance, went up to the desk and asked the number of Miss Whiteur's room. Look, gentlemen! His face confesses it!"

It was true; not a man in the room, looking at him, doubted it.

But Lemale wasted no time in protesting his innocence. With Miss Carresca's concluding sentences, he had slipped nearer to, and slightly behind, Willoughby who, in his absorption in her statement, had come forward a step or two from the door. Lemale wrenched it open and bolted.

As he leaped into the hall, Willoughby turned in pursuit of him, calling on him to halt. Two of the plain-clothes men followed.

Lemale gained the head of the stairs and went down them four and five at a jump. Willoughby, when almost at the foot of them, saw him open the front door, his figure bent over and silhouetted in the rectangle of glaring sunlight.

Lemale wheeled and, whipping out a revolver, fired at him pointblank. Willoughby returned the fire, shooting twice. As he did so, the man closest behind him also fired. The crack of one gun was the echo of the other's second shot.

Lemale dropped in his tracks. When Willoughby and the other two pursuers bent over him, he was dead. One of the bullets had caught him between the shoulder blades and gone to his heart. He had died without so much as a groan.

Willoughby, his inspection of the body completed, stood up.

"He was too damned clever, like all the rest of 'em," he told his companions. "If he hadn't tried to put the murder on Barrone by dropping a visiting card with forged writing on it in that bathroom, I'd never have suspected him. Fellow named Wilmeth practically clinched the case last night."

CHAPTER XXVI

AN INTRODUCTION

As Captain Sullivan was about to leave the lounge, bringing up the rear of the guard taking Barrone, von Palz and Forney to police headquarters, Carston Vail drew him aside and made a whispered request.

Dolores Carresca, waiting near the window at the other end of the room, heard the captain's bluff answer:

"Certainly, Mr. Vail; I'll see to that."

Sullivan hurried out, leaving the door ajar, and Vail walked over and shut it.

He came down the room toward her, and she regarded him with imploring eyes. It was if, with that look, she besought his pardon for what she had done to him. But even in her bewilderment she realized in a vague way that he was transformed, that in carriage and in face he was, magically, the same Carston Vail who had called on her at the Saragonda Legation Monday morning. The strained look had left his face; his shoulders had their old jaunty swing.

"Now, Miss Carresca," he said in mock severity, "after giving me all this trouble, you'll tell me where that ammunition ship is. Won't you?"

Her answer was entirely mechanical. Her mind, busy with bigger things, was like a phonograph record

under the needle of his questioning. She wanted to talk about something that did not matter; it would give her time to grope for an explanation of that which now seemed to her inexplicable.

"Near Norfolk," she replied tonelessly. "She's been seized by this time."

"And how did you find her after you failed to make Barrone give you her location?"

She was looking at him curiously, the faint frown on her forehead.

"Yes," she responded musing. "I failed in that. A confederate in New York found her for me, wired me the information early Thursday morning."

The sound of the men going down the front steps came up to them.

She sat down suddenly.

"But I don't understand!" she said helplessly, and glanced from him to the closed door and back again. "You're under arrest, aren't you?"

He laughed.

"Miss Dolores Carresca," he replied, with a deep bow, "allow me to present to you Mr. Carston J. Vail, of the Secret Service of the State Department of the United States!"

Her hand went to her mouth, her eyes widened with wonder, she slowly rose from the chair as if a force outside herself drew her to her feet. Alarm, as of something too big to grasp, and a dawning comprehension were in her look.

He gave her time to understand.

"When you were talking to me down in the office," he explained, and gently forced her back into her seat, "I didn't understand. I didn't get it fully until we were in this room. Even then I was afraid to believe it. Incidentally, I had arranged for Barfield to let you go free. Made it the price of my work. Told him you were a real patriot, misguided by these scoundrels. You see, don't you? While you were assigned to run down the conspirators by your Government, Barfield gave me the same detail from this end."

"You!" she cried. "You——"

She was for the moment speechless. He still waited for her to understand. She must think as clearly as he when she answered the only question that mattered to him.

"Bonilla, I suppose," he suggested, "knew who you were from the outset."

"Oh, yes."

He laughed boyishly.

"If I live to be a thousand," he said, "I'll never forget Barrone Sunday night. That bow! That suave and overpowering tribute, 'Your methods are perfect!' He never spoke a truer word. But the photograph. That puzzles me yet. How did you manage it?"

"The writing was copied from the writing on the photograph of the real Margarita Domenza. It was done in New York. Very cleverly."

Her lips trembled, as near to tears as to smile. Her eyes, a dark blue now, were solemn, but glowing with a great light. She understood everything, and yet feared the outcome of it. Her memory flashed back through the days she had known him. Had she said anything to make it impossible for him to think well of her, now that his good opinion was all she valued in the world? The revelation of who he was had so wrenched loose all her thought and opinion of him that she had needed these few moments which he had so mercifully given her, needed them to see him in all his bigness, and loyalty, and generosity.

He saw that she was no longer bewildered.

"Now," he said, "confess I've been a pretty clever fellow myself, clever because I knew you when I thought you were a conspirator, loved you when I had no right to love you!"

She laughed, the sound of it like tiny silver bells.

"You marvellous woman!" he said, and bent and caught both her hands. "I love you. You were made for adoration. For my adoring!"

She rose to him, her hands still in his.

"You wonderful man!" she whispered. "You wonderful man!"

THE END

2

Handwritten notes, possibly a list or index, written diagonally across the page. The text is illegible due to the angle and handwriting.

